



UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

**SEXUAL CONSENT AMONGST YOUNG MEN WHO HAVE SEX WITH WOMEN: HOW
IT CAN BE CONCEPTUALISED, PRACTISED AND INFLUENCED.**

by

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ABSTRACT

This research explores how young men who have sex with women, aged 18-25, conceptualise consent, narrate their experiences of practising consent and the personal and contextual factors which influence these two things. Explicit, affirmative consent is widely considered to be ideal; however, it is a theoretical conceptualisation of consent involving a simplistic communicative exchange. Previous research has shown that most adults will define consent as following the affirmative model, but their consent communication in practice does not often follow this model and is more complex, nuanced and fluidly influenced by context. Thus, there is a need to consider how consent is practised in a real-world context when individuals are seeking positive, consensual sexual experiences. This study foregrounds young men's real-world consent communication experiences, how that communication functions, their feelings about consent and the influence of different contexts.

The research is an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study which centres experience. The qualitative methods involved two in-depth interviews and six weeks of diary entries. During the six weeks, participants were given a sample set of pornography which showcased explicit consent to aid their reflections. When discussions about consent can be highly theoretical, an audio-visual vignette can be a useful resource to ground conversations in a sexual context and aid reflection; and this was the case for the participants.

The key finding was that the participants used mostly physical communication strategies in the moment to navigate consent throughout evolving sexual experiences. However, the participants also engaged in verbal communication with their partners outside of the moment in the form of ongoing conversations about boundaries and desires, which aided their physical communication during sex. The major contribution to the field is the production of a new model for understanding consent communication during sexual experiences: Coordinated Management of Consent (CMC). CMC should not be interpreted as an ideal way to communicate consent but is instead a descriptive model which outlines the participants' processes of communication; how this sample of people approached and enacted consent. In other words, it is a means of describing how the participants practiced consent and what guided their practice.

Key terms: Consent, Sexual Communication, Young Men, Masculinities, Pornography

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1. INTRODUCTION

Consent is a vital part of relationships and essential in sexual relations. Consent is also a form of communication, involving the sharing and understanding of sexual desires and boundaries (Beres, 2010). When consent is communicated clearly, it ensures that everyone involved is comfortable, happy and agrees to take part in the activities, safeguarding their wellbeing and helping to protect them from physical and emotional harm (Burton et al, 2023). However, this communication can be complicated by social stereotypes, assumptions and pressures, misunderstood, or undervalued. There is a wealth of research about what complications in consent communication can look like and how they might lead to intentional or unintentional harm (Graf and Johnson, 2021; Willis et al, 2019; Willis et al, 2020).

1.1 The 'Right' Way to Do Consent

Research undertaken about consent practice has been used to determine how effectively individuals are communicating consent. Some of this research about consent has focussed on a predetermined idea of what people *should do* regarding consent, thus, what constitutes 'good' or 'poor' consent practice is somewhat divorced from real-world behaviours and instead based on idealised theory (Curtis & Burnett, 2017; (Shumlich, & Fisher, 2020; Goodcase, Spencer & Toews, 2021). The affirmative consent model is heralded as the current best practice and some researchers, policymakers and educators will argue that anything less than exact adherence to that model should not be considered consent (Graf and Johnson, 2021; Setty, 2021). The affirmative model states that the person initiating a sexual act should ask for and receive a clear, direct and preferably verbal 'yes' directly before engaging in that act (Brook, 2022; Planned Parenthood, 2022; gov.uk, 2024).

However, research in the field also tells us that people rarely follow the affirmative model, thus practise rarely correlates with the ideal. Most people do not often use direct verbal consent communication strategies with their partner in the moment (Graf and Johnson, 2021; Goodcase, Spencer & Toews, 2021; Shumlich & Fisher, 2020; Willis et al, 2019). Also, most people do not follow a single model of consent practice in all contexts. Contextual factors which vary by person and the specific sexual situation they find themselves in, will impact how they communicate consent and there are different norms of consent practice for different contexts. Factors such as the relationship between those having sex, the type of sexual behaviours and gender identity can guide the norms, stereotypes and expectations of consent communication (Hills et al, 2020; Willis et al, 2020; Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013; Graf and Johnson, 2021). Consent communication can also be complicated, nuanced and can be characterised by confusion or grey areas, “a more subtle level of social and cultural pressures”, which can lead people to accept unwanted sex without the presence of direct coercion or assault (Powell, 2008: 170). The affirmative model is simple and therefore attractive, as an easy solution to ensure people engage in consensual sex. In reality, consent is rarely so simple because human relationships, sexualities and communication are subjective, complex and fluid. Therefore, research about consent needs to engage with the interpersonal complexities that are unavoidable in human relationships and interactions.

1.2 Centring Experience of Consent Communication

In contrast, rather than considering an idealised, predetermined model, this research shall explore what people report that they *are doing* when they are trying to engage in consensual sex acts, how they communicate and how they feel regarding consent. The research foregrounds the experiences of those communicating consent to explore the methods of communication they use and how they understand their sexual partners' communications. This thesis explores methods of communication, feelings and values about consent and what can complicate that communication. It considers accounts of what people do when they want to engage in positive, consensual sexual experiences with others. Thus, the data has a 'real-world' focus, in so far as it explores how people describe and feel about their subjective experiences of consent regarding their own sexual encounters.

Researching the real-world behaviours of those valuing consent and seeking consensual encounters is a gap in the field. Exploring this leads to the possibility of alternatively developing an understanding of consent as it is subjectively experienced and communicated during sex. This thesis develops and presents an evidence-informed theory of consent communication, based on an in-depth analysis of sexual behaviours and feelings as they were narrated to the researcher. The analysis of participants' data allowed the development of a new theory of consent practice: Coordinated Management of Consent (CMC). This theory demonstrates how individuals communicate and understand sexual consent. CMC is not advocated as an ideal or aspirational way to communicate consent, rather it is a descriptive model which presents the methods of communication used by the participants to navigate consent. The analysis and theory presented in this thesis can add to existing work in

the field of consent behaviour and could be used as resource to help to consider how consent practice might be improved.

In addition, this research engages with the group: young adult men who have sex with women, specifically. Research more frequently explores young men as the perpetrators of con-consensual sex, whereas this research considers how young men behave when they report intending to engage in consensual sex, and centres their voices (Tharp et al, 2013: 134). It is beneficial to engage with different perspectives regarding this topic to build a full, inclusive understanding of the intricacies of consent, and when perpetrators of sexual harm are disproportionately male, it is vital to work with young men to understand the reasons why and work on preventative initiatives (King-Hill, 2022). Some studies have engaged with young men, however, their voices have been relatively marginalised by researchers and professionals due to resistance or challenges impacting inclusion (Waling, James & Fairchild, 2023). For example, Waling, James and Fairchild (2023) put forward that sex education professionals find it challenging to dismantle the prominent belief amongst young men that they need to be the active party during sex with women, solely responsible for consent, and the anxieties and unhealthy expectations which can come from this. Without open, honest and judgement-free dialogue, boys reported feeling ashamed, scared of getting into trouble and disengaged out of fear, and resultantly professionals found it hard to reopen the conversation (Waling, James & Fairchild, 2023).

Research does not often seek to understand men's lived experiences and subjective perceptions of consent and how it functions in their lives (Setty, 2022). For example, when considering issues relating to sexual violence and consent, researchers and

policymakers rarely work with young men to understand their experiences and perceptions of sex, relationships and consent. When educational campaigns do not listen to young men's voices, existing insecurities can be heightened, because they feel demonised and isolated, giving more power to the damaging ideologies those campaigns were trying to reduce (King-Hill, 2022). Conversations on topics about relationships with women, such as consent, are often fuelled by blame, which sets genders against each other and shuts down dialogue, exacerbating rather than solving the issue (King-Hill, 2022). Setty (2023b) argues that instead of telling boys and men they are wrong and that their beliefs are harmful, policymakers need to work with young men to listen to them about sex and relationships. This study listens to young men, asking them about their perspectives and experiences of consent in a non-judgemental and blameless environment. It centres the voices of those communicating consent to understand the realities of consent communication via the experiences of men who report seeking to engage in positive, consensual sexual experiences.

1.3 Research Aims and Methods

This thesis aims to build a realistic picture of consent communication based on narratives of real-life practices and experiences. By 'practice' and 'experience', this research refers to behaviours and events as they have been subjectively experienced by the participants, how they have personally applied meaning, and how they have narrated and chosen to present those experiences to the researcher. Whilst the affirmative model presents an ideal understanding of consent which is rarely utilised, this thesis aims to present the participants' perceived and narrated realities of how consent is understood and communicated when they have sex (Graf and Johnson, 2021; Goodcase, Spencer & Toews, 2021; Shumlich & Fisher, 2020; Willis et al, 2019).

The research explores how young men who have sex with women conceptualise and practise sexual consent with their sexual partners, and the malleability of their understanding and practise. Thus, this research was conducted as an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study, to foreground experience.

The project is a qualitative study, with a maintained focus on the young men's experiences and their perception of those experiences. The participants self-identified as men, 18-25 years old, who had sex with women and were current students at a UK university. Data were collected via two interviews and six weeks of diary entries. The participants took part in an opening semi-structured interview, through which their usual consent practice and previous experiences were explored. They were then sent a collection of sample pornographic videos containing examples of consent communication to watch in their own time and space.

Mainstream pornography has been critiqued for its limited or absent depictions of consent as well as violence and misogyny (Shor and Seida, 2019; Terán and Dajches, 2020; Peter and Valkenburg, 2016). Most research engaging with pornography is about pornography, aiming to unpack the issues which can arise from its production or content (Smith and Attwood, 2014). Yet, pornography is diverse, and there are examples of ethically produced porn, porn created for or used in adult sex education, and pornography with clear consent in the narrative (Philpott, Singh and Gamlin, 2017; Dawson et al, 2022; Mikkola, 2019). Videos showing explicit consent were systematically selected for this study. Some viewers may still find the sexual acts shown in the sample set of films uncomfortable or performative, depending on their

own subjective tastes or values. However, the films were considered more helpful than harmful because the consent communications between actors to take part in the sex acts shown were clearly depicted and so could be used as a tool for reflection and discussion with the participants.

Using pornography to prompt reflection about consent in this manner is original and useful because conversations about consent can be theoretical, whereas porn can provide an explicit demonstration of what consent might look like in the context of sexual experience. When discussions about consent can often be highly theoretical, especially in sex education settings, porn (as an explicit portrayal of sex) can be a useful resource to ground conversations in behaviour and experience (Albury, 2014; Harle, 2022). This can prompt a deeper reflection about sexual consent understanding and practice.

Participants then took part in six weeks of diary entries, completing one entry after each sexual experience, and then a follow-up interview. The diaries gave the participants time to reflect and report on their experiences as they happened in privacy, at the time they happened. They also provided a useful comparison alongside the interviews to look for differences between how the participants describe the events in privacy and how they narrativise the events in the presence of the researcher. In the follow-up interview, the participants reflected on the process, and their experiences over the study period, and shared their developing thoughts on consent. In total, 11 participants took part in the study; 11 completed the first interview and seven continued to complete the six-week process of writing diary entries and the follow-up

interview. The participants' data were analysed using IPA, which allowed an in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences, feelings and unique contexts. This method allowed a deeper consideration of sexual consent to better understand not just how the participants described practising consent, but how they conceptualised and understood consent. IPA approaches allow an in-depth exploration of experience and individual perspectives; how participants subjectively view consent and engage in sexual communication.

1.4 An Introduction to the Key Findings

Three superordinate themes were created via the analysis process. Two of these themes describe and explain how the participants conceptualised and practised consent with their partners. The third superordinate theme described how they engaged with the pornographic sample materials, how they reflected on and evaluated their consent practice over the course of the study and any potential impacts on their future consent communication. The study findings explore what the participants understand consent to mean, what they describe their consent communication as consisting of and the logistics of how that communication functions.

Although most participants *defined* consent following the affirmative model, they did not *practise* consent following this model. Unlike the affirmative model, which can present consent as a transaction asked by one person of another, consent communication as practised by the study participants was a communication which flowed between them. The participants used mostly physical (non-verbal) consent communication strategies with their partners during sexual experiences. By 'physical

consent' I mean using physical cues, suggestions and signals to ask for and give consent rather than verbal communications. They used physical signals to understand when their partner was consenting and when they might not be; to tentatively query their partners' consent and to demonstrate their own. Their communication during sexual encounters involved an ongoing to-ing and fro-ing of interpreting their partners' signals and enacting signals to communicate back to them.

The findings also demonstrated that the participants did engage in verbal conversations about sex, but this rarely happened in the moment. Instead, they described having conversations in advance or after a sexual experience, which would then be used to inform the next sexual experience. These discussions involved their boundaries (what they didn't want to do or would not be willing to try) as well as what they desired (what they wanted to try out, what they would like to experience during sex). They felt that these conversations aided their non-verbal communication in the moment.

I have developed an original theory from the participants' data, to describe their consent communication processes and explain how it functioned according to their subjective accounts. The theory is developed from coordinated management of meaning theory (CMM) which was theorised by Pearce (2005), and I have termed it Coordinated Management of Consent (CMC). The participants' consent communication during sexual experiences was cyclical in nature and they were constantly undergoing a process of interpreting their partners' physical communication

acts and then performing their own physical communication acts. Through this, they could continuously confirm or query their partners' ongoing consent or suggest new activities throughout an evolving sexual experience. In their subjective experiences of this communication, they mostly felt they were accurately determining the meaning of their partners' physical communications and could perform communication acts in response, which they felt to be expected and accepted by their partner. However, contextual factors could also complicate the non-verbal communication cycle. Norms and assumptions about gender roles were highly influential, such as the idea that young men always want sex or that men need to be sexual initiators and so should be the one to ask for consent. CMC is a descriptive model of consent as it is practiced in the narratives of the study participants. CMC theory is presented in detail in the discussion chapter.

The CMC model of consent could be used as a resource to help to further interrogate the practice of consent, explore the factors which help young men to communicate about consent more accurately and unpack the contextual factors which can complicate or disrupt consent communication. With a CMC as a contributing model of how young men communicate consent, we can more accurately address the issue of consent and potentially utilise this to contribute to consent education programmes which more accurately respond to and aim to improve how people communicate consent.

1.5 Thesis Structure

The following literature chapter provides a summary and review of the relevant previous research in the field. It provides the academic basis for the study and justifies its conception. The first chapter details previous literature about how consent is commonly understood and practised and the social factors which can influence consent practice, such as gender and relationship type. It also explores literature about pornography and its relationship with sexual behaviour including consent to critically justify the use of pornography in this study. It considers relevant theories used to explore and explain sexual behaviour, which can be applied to sexual consent. Finally, it explains why young men who have sex with women face unique circumstances and challenges due to their intersecting identities and highlights a need to conduct research with this population.

After this, the methodology chapter outlines the research philosophy, the methods used to collect the primary data and the process undertaken to analyse the data. It explains the IPA approach and why a mixture of interviews and diaries were used to achieve an in-depth understanding of each participant's unique experiences and contexts. The chapter also contains reflexivity and ethical considerations, as well as a section on the process used to collect the pornographic sample materials to be used in the study.

The findings chapters present the Superordinate Themes created via the analysis process and explain how they answer the research questions. There are three chapters, each focussing on one Superordinate Theme each. The chapters provide a

detailed summary of each of the Superordinate Themes, the sub-themes contained within each and how each participant's data reflected the themes. The chapters include a close reading of the participants' responses and how these indicate particular understandings and practices of sexual consent.

The discussion chapter explains how the Superordinate Themes reflect and build upon previous research in the field and how the findings contribute to a more detailed understanding of young men and consent within the field. The chapter also explains CMC theory in depth, the limitations of the findings, and how CMC could be explored further by policymakers and in future research.

The concluding chapter provides an overview of the thesis; the approach, methods, results and implications. It shall summarise the work and outline key points to be drawn from the thesis.

2 LITERATURE: HOW IS CONSENT CONCEPTUALISED, PRACTISED, AND INFLUENCED

2.1 Literature Introduction

This literature chapter explores current theoretical perspectives and previous research in the field, relating to sexual consent and the (hetero)sexual experiences of young men. The research questions query how young men who have sex with women understand and practise consent with their sexual partners, and how this might be influenced by personal and wider contextual factors. Therefore, this chapter is divided into four sections which consider:

- how consent is currently conceptualised in theory,
- the complicated nature of consent in practice,
- how consent is malleable, how it can be influenced and how individuals can reflect on consent,
- and the unique contexts experienced by young men who have sex with women which can impact their experiences of consent.

The chapter firstly explores how consent is often theoretically conceptualised as an ideal. The affirmative consent model is currently considered best practice and taught as such to young people in sex education contexts (Graf and Johnson, 2021; Setty, 2021). In this chapter I shall discuss what is meant by affirmative consent and how it is considered best practice. Individuals rarely practise consent according to the affirmative model, but may define consent following the affirmative model or repeat this definition in research contexts because they have been taught that this is the

‘correct’ thing to say even if it does not align with their practise. This section explores why there may be a discordance between how consent is defined in the ideal and how it is practised.

The chapter then explores how consent in real-world practice is more complex, nuanced and changes according to context. It considers what the literature on consent has found to be expectations or norms for consent practice. It presents how understanding and practise of consent are shaped by layers of contexts relating to perceived sexual desire, gender roles, relationship status and type of sexual behaviour.

The chapter then presents the notion that if, unlike theoretical conceptualisations, consent in practice varies according to context, then it is fluid, malleable and can be influenced by external factors. It considers how pornography has been argued to be a key influencer of sexual behaviour and thus consent practice. It then argues that individuals are not passively compelled to copy behaviour from porn, instead actively using it as a tool for reflection. Hence porn was selected as a tool for reflection in the methodology of the present study to encourage deeper thought about consent during the research process.

The research question is directed towards the demographic, young men who have sex with women, specifically, so the chapter finally explores how the study frames this intersectional identity and how identity can impact understanding and practice of consent. This section considers how ideals of masculinity, and heterosexual sexual

experiences are constructed and the impacts these ideals can have on individuals' sexual values and behaviours (and therefore consent because consent is a sexual behaviour) (Butler, 1999; Connell, 2005).

2.2 Consent in Theory (Conceptualising Consent)

Consent best practice is defined theoretically. It has been identified that currently in England, individuals, academics and educators widely understand consent best practice as following the affirmative consent model (Burton et al, 2023; Rollero & Roccato, 2023). This model emphasises that agreement should not be assumed from anything less than a clear, direct (and preferably) verbal 'yes' (Graf and Johnson, 2021; Setty, 2021). However, individuals rarely practise consent in this way, even if they might define ideal consent practice as following the affirmative model in theory (Graf and Johnson, 2021; Goodcase, Spencer & Toews, 2021; Shumlich & Fisher, 2020).

2.2.1 Consent Best Practice:

Campaigns and laws (as set out in The Sexual Offences Act, 2003) relating to sexual consent, establish consent as a clear agreement, which can be verbal or through obvious non-verbal cues (Graf and Johnson, 2021: 449; Setty, 2021: 331). Most Relationships and Sex Education programmes in England will start with this definition and will highlight the importance of the "affirmative consent model", emphasising the responsibility of those initiating sex to secure a "clear and direct yes", without coercion (Setty, 2021: 332). The model protects those who may feel unable to refuse once a sexual act has been initiated and helps to prevent victim blaming in cases of assault.

Consent campaigns will advocate for a “yes means yes” model (affirmative consent) rather than a “no means no” model, which places the onus on the initiator to ask for consent before starting anything sexual, rather than on the recipient to refuse if they feel uncomfortable (Graf and Johnson, 2021: 449; Muehlenhard et al, 2016: 465).

Muehlenhard et al (2016) define “explicit consent” (p.462) as verbal and directly given permission to engage in sexual acts. Explicit consent given in this manner is encouraged in some communities, such as in BDSM (Bondage, Discipline, Dominance, Submission, Sadism, and Masochism) communities, but most individuals do not “discuss sexual consent this explicitly” in reality and instead rely on a variety of verbal and non-verbal cues (Muehlenhard et al, 2016: 462).

Ideal sexual consent has also been “described as an ongoing negotiation”, which involves checking in with a partner throughout the sexual experiences for verbal and non-verbal signals of consent (Muehlenhard et al, 2016: 4624). Furthermore, Hills et al (2021: 248) argue that consent should be an ongoing process because activities will change and progress throughout the sexual experience, so it is important to ensure that consent is obtained throughout. Alternatively, feelings about sex acts may change and a person may feel uncomfortable or want to stop during a previously agreed act. Sexual experiences rarely follow a set plan, so individuals may face “uncertainty and ambivalence” regarding the activities which will take place, which can be resolved through effective ongoing communication (Hills et al, 2021: 248).

Effective consent strategies can be a part of wider, ongoing communication about sex. Sexual self-disclosure (SSD) refers to the process of communicating likes and dislikes to a sexual partner and is associated with greater relationship satisfaction (Newstrom, Harris & Miner, 2021: 456). Newstrom, Harris and Miner (2021: 456) argue that this process is similar to the process of consent however, it could be argued that consent is a part of SSD conversations, because a conversation about likes and dislikes would also cover desires and boundaries. They also suggest that comfort with sexual communication, which enables good SSD and disclosure of sexual fantasy, may also increase comfort in using verbal consent cues (Newstrom, Harris & Miner, 2021: 456). As ideal consent is part of ongoing communication, prior to and during sexual experiences, “greater sexual communication assertiveness was associated with positive attitudes, intentions and ability to interpret sexual consent communication” (Shafer et al, 2018: 48). Thus, effective consent practice is part of wider effective communications about sex, wants and desires, as well as boundaries, and Shafer et al (2018:48) suggest that consent education programmes should focus on more widely improving sexual communication assertiveness.

It has been argued that there are distinct rewards to verbal consent, beyond ensuring that sexual encounters are consensual (Shumlich & Fisher, 2020: 1115). In communicating about sex generally more directly, individuals can voice their sexual desires as well as their boundaries, leading to more pleasurable sex (Edwards, Rehmanand & Byers, 2022: 2420-21). Furthermore, the act of voicing verbal consent itself can be found arousing or considered akin to dirty talk, so explicit consent can add to, rather than undermining, eroticism (Edwards, Rehmanand & Byers, 2022: 2420-21). For individuals who “valued and felt comfortable with direct consent

communication”, verbal communication is difficult if their partner is not receptive to it, “freezes up” or refuses to communicate in response, thus, all parties need to communicate with each other for affirmative consent to function (Edwards, Rehmanand & Byers, 2022: 2418). However, Gilbert (2018: 276) argues that affirmative consent practice can prevent elements of surprise, curiosity and vulnerability which enrich intimate experiences, or make room for circumstances when a person is ambivalent about sex, or willing to try.

2.2.2 Barriers to Affirmative Consent Practise:

Explicit, affirmative consent models are taught to young people in sex education in England and college campaigns in the US, as the gold-standard of consent communication (Burton et al, 2023: 2; Rollero & Roccato, 2023:2). Whilst most adults describe the importance of affirmative, explicit consent in theory, this does not match how they frequently practise consent when engaging sexually with others (Graf and Johnson, 2021; Goodcase, Spencer & Toews, 2021; Shumlich & Fisher, 2020). People tend to rely on more non-verbal consent strategies (Rollero & Roccato, 2023:2; Willis et al, 2019). Studies show that consent is rarely communicated verbally and explicitly in the moment, “instead, consent/non-consent tends to be communicated non-verbally and via behavioural cues”, which can be more complex or difficult to interpret (Setty, 2021: 332). People have also described an atmosphere or “internal feeling of knowing what is and is not wanted”, reporting “you can just tell” if something is ok (Wignall, Stirling & Scoats, 2022: 480). Goodcase, Spencer and Toews (2021) found that nearly all their study participants would gain consent, stop when asked and respect the importance of consent, indicating “a clear understanding of the importance of obtaining explicit consent” (p.7500). However, they rarely utilised verbal consent (Goodcase,

Spencer & Toews, 2021). In addition, most people would describe consent in basic terms such as “agreement to engage in sexual acts” and not consider the complexities of different situations (Graf and Johnson, 2021: 449). Furthermore, often adults can describe what consent is not, or what would invalidate consent, such as instances of “coercion, diminished capacity to consent, age restrictions”, but not what it is (Graf and Johnson, 2021: 449). Potentially this is due to a focus on non-consensual sex and assault prevention in sex education settings, rather than a focus on promoting pleasurable and healthy experiences. Therefore, this knowledge, although important, would not help these people to practise good consent, or help them understand what they should do or say to ask for or give consent.

Willis et al (2020) set out a series of social norms regarding consent practice which they have developed from multiple studies. The first social norm they explored was the belief that “explicit verbal consent isn't natural” (Willis et al, 2020:53). Explicit verbal consent is not considered natural or attractive, and to ask for consent verbally and directly in the moment is deemed odd, robotic or awkward (Willis, 2020). In addition, it is also a norm to believe that “sex can happen without ongoing communication” (Willis et al, 2020:53). Consent is understood as a distinct exchange occurring before sexual contact and people will often only deem it necessary to ask for consent once. It is not normalised to check in throughout sex or between sexual acts (Willis, 2020).

There are barriers which prevent individuals from utilising verbal consent strategies (Edwards, Rehmanand & Byers, 2022: 2410). Many people worry that verbal consent will feel awkward, unnatural, disrupt the flow of sex, or may be uncomfortable or

embarrassing to discuss (Edwards, Rehmanand & Byers, 2022: 2417; Shumlich & Fisher, 2020: 1115). Verbal, affirmative consent may feel awkward or less spontaneous (Wignall, Stirling & Scoats, 2022: 479). Individuals may also worry that verbal consent might be negatively perceived by their partner. They might worry that affirmative consent will make them seem “inexperienced or only interested in sex” (Shumlich & Fisher, 2020: 1115). Or it could be interpreted as “creepy and pushy” or suggest a fault in the relationship if consent cannot be accurately interpreted from non-verbal signs (Edwards, Rehmanand & Byers, 2022: 2417). Verbal consent might also be difficult due to a perceived lack of skill from experience in doing so (Edwards, Rehmanand & Byers, 2022: 2417). Individuals may also struggle to refuse sex verbally due to worry about hurting their partner’s feelings, or conversely, initiate sex non-verbally because “straight-out asking or trying and then being rejected...would be qualitatively different than getting rejected nonverbally”; it may prompt greater shame (Shumlich & Fisher, 2020: 1115).

Affirmative consent is valuable because reliance on non-verbal cues and signals to navigate consent leaves room for the possibility of miscommunication about consent. If consent is practised indirectly, one party may believe that the experience was consensual, whilst the other feels like it was not, or both might agree to unwanted sex due to social pressures which are bigger than the individuals involved (Setty, 2023: 2). Young men involved in Setty’s (2023: 10) study expressed that a girl might say yes due to pressure, but not actually want sex, or may indicate discomfort non-verbally using cues or body language which they cannot understand, leading to scenarios whereby from the subjective perceptions of these boys, they feel like the scenario would feel consensual to them, whilst the girl might feel otherwise.

Among young people, some but not all, sexual harm is due to miscommunication, because of inadequate communication and socio-emotional skills, and gendered pressures (Setty, 2023). In these cases, the harm or hurt is no less real or felt, but occurred without malignance or malintent because they did not ignore consent on purpose (Setty, 2023: 10). However, when people “knowingly or recklessly violate someone’s boundaries”, miscommunication should not be used as an excuse (Setty, 2023: 7). Young people may interpret a range of behaviours as indicative of consent to sex. Some of these include touching, such as dancing close together, but others may not, such as smiling or agreeing to go out on a date, which may be intended as friendly rather than sexual (King, et al, 2021). King et al (2021) found that young people are more likely to interpret potentially friendly, non-verbal signals as indicative of consent, when they witness a few signals in succession, as they feel that the likelihood of sex being wanted is increased (King et al, 2021: NP13129). Many people will assume that consent is given unless they notice a clear sign, verbal or non-verbal, of refusal (Wignall, Stirling & Scoats, 2022: 477-8). Therefore, whilst they are respecting their partner’s wishes when they say ‘no’, they are not waiting for a ‘yes’ before proceeding, not following affirmative consent practice.

2.3 The Complicated Nature of Real-World Consent (Practising Consent)

In contrast to how ideal consent practice is conceptualised and defined theoretically, research has shown us that consent in the real-world context is more nuanced and complicated, and people rarely follow the ideal. Consent during sexual experiences is largely practised non-verbally and guided by norms and expectations. Expectations relating to desire or arousal, gender roles, relationship status and the type of sexual

behaviour, impact how consent is communicated between individuals during sexual experiences. Thus, consent may be communicated differently in different contexts, with varying degrees of success. This contrasts the conceptualisation of ideal consent as following the affirmative model, which argues that every consent exchange needs to include an explicit prior agreement (Setty, 2021). Willis et al's (2019) study of consent amongst college students found that although most believed that their consent communication should be explicit and verbal, their consent practice varied according to context.

2.3.1 Consent Norms and Desire:

Muehlenhard et al (2016) argue that the communication of consent has three components:

1. Person A feels an internal willingness
2. Person A communicates that willingness to person B
3. Person B perceives Person A's communication of willingness

Therefore, consent is a form of communication. To feel willingness internally is not sufficient. That willingness needs to be externally communicated and understood by the other person. There is also potential for misunderstanding at all three stages. Stage 1 alone is not enough as it cannot be accurately assumed without communication. At stage 2, willingness may not be clearly conveyed verbally or non-verbally, or person A may not be asked for consent and given an opportunity to communicate. At stage 3, person B may inaccurately interpret signals from person A, and wrongly assume consent.

Some people only define consent as an “internal state of willingness” (stage 1 above only) and thus assume that internal wanting is synonymous with consent (Graf and Johnson, 2021: 449). Thus, consent is understood as something which is not directly observable, instead, the intent is inferred (Muehlenhard et al, 2016: 462). Intention cannot be proven or known for certain unless it is externally communicated through verbal or non-verbal cues. Some people assume consent from behaviours which may or may not indicate consent, such as revealing clothing, friendly or flirty conversation or past sexual history. Worryingly, “research suggests this is a preferred method of conveying consent, despite the fact that this is the very thing that can lead to miscommunication and potential violations of consent” (Graf and Johnson, 2021: 449). Many “anti-violence campaigns” have worked to try to “dismiss myths that clothing or flirting are appropriate signals to interpret as consent” (Graf and Johnson, 2021: 449). Muehlenhard et al (2016) note that this understanding of consent is “similar to the legal concept of implied consent” in the US (p. 462), whereby consent is indicated by a sign, signal or silence. However, they note it would be more accurate to term it “inferred consent”, because the “person whose consent is in question” may or may not be actively giving out any signals, instead, they may be the inactive party whose consent is assumed or inferred by another regardless of whether they actually consent themselves (Muehlenhard et al, 2016: 462).

Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras (2008) note that consensual sex may not always be synonymous with wanted sex, focussing on the experiences of young women in college. Typical conceptualisations of ideal consent, presume that a “consensual sexual encounter is also a wanted one”, however, there are many circumstances

where “saying “yes” to a partner’s sexual overtures does not necessarily signal unequivocal interest or desire” (Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras, 2008: 386). A person may desire sex but not consent to it (e.g. fear of STIs, it would involve being unfaithful to a partner), or may consent to sex, without pressure or coercion, whilst not desiring it (e.g. they are trying to get pregnant, to make a partner happy). Furthermore, an individual may feel ambivalent and simultaneously want sex for some reasons whilst not wanting it for others, however, with a liminal internal state, they will then convey a binary ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to indicate consent or lack thereof. Thus, their declaration of consent and internal state do not match. Muehlenhard et al (2016:463) note that the distinction between wanting and consenting also exists for nonsexual behaviours, so an individual may want to do something, such as skip work, but will not choose to, or they might not want to do something, like housework, but will still choose to do it.

Kaestle (2009) argues that “consenting to unwanted sex is associated with both positive and negative outcomes” (p.33) within a partnership and this depends on the motivation to consent to unwanted activity. They found that when consenting was motivated by the hope of obtaining a positive outcome, such as increasing their partner’s happiness, this was associated with good individual well-being and a strong relationship. However, they found that “when the motivation is the wish to avoid a negative outcome, such as conflict or the loss of the partner, well-being and relationship quality are relatively poor” (Kaestle, 2009:33-4). In summary, when the person had autonomy and felt empowered in their choice, they felt positive about giving consent even if the experience was unwanted.

Non-consensual sex is rape or assault, however, the presence of wantedness and pleasure highly influence whether a scenario is perceived as such, “despite neither being part of the definition of rape” (Hills et al, 2021: 256). In England, the Sexual Offences Act (2003) states that consent must be freely given by someone who has the capacity to make that choice, therefore, if unwanted sex is autonomously agreed to, it is not assault. However, wanting or desiring sex is not in itself part of the definition of consent (Sexual Offences Act, 2003). If a survivor is deemed to “want sex and get pleasure from it”, but did not consent to sex, “this will less likely be perceived as rape, despite clearly being such and this may lead to negative unwanted circumstances” (Hills et al, 2021: 256). When consent is defined as the same as wanting, or conflated with desire, this can cause issues as “behaviours indicative of desire”, such as physical arousal which the individual has no control over, can be inaccurately “interpreted as indicative of consent” (Muehlenhard et al, 2016: 463). In most cases, rape is committed by an acquaintance and is likely to be the product of coercion, however, there remains a widespread stereotype that ‘real rape’ is committed by a violent stranger and that acquaintance rape is less distressing (Hills et al, 2020:172). This can lead to acquaintance rape cases being taken less seriously, increased victim-blaming and hesitancy from survivors to label these events as rape, instead labelling it “bad sex” or “miscommunication” (Hills et al, 2020:172). Hills et al (2020: 174) showed participants sexual vignettes each showcasing varying degrees of wanting, consent and pleasure, to understand attitudes towards what constitutes rape. They found that participants “rated pleasurable wanted but not consensual scenarios as less representative of rape than not pleasurable ones”, showing that they did not always recognise non-consensual sex as rape, especially when pleasure was present (Hills et al, 2020: 191). Thus, signs of arousal, indicative of desire, such as an erection, may

be interpreted as consent, even though this is not consciously controlled and thus does not signify the individual choosing to engage in sexual activity.

2.3.2 Consent Norms and Gender:

Willis et al (2020) set out a list of norms of consent practice. Two of Willis et al's (2020) listed norms related to the influence of gender on consent norms within heterosexual dynamics. Firstly, the belief that "women are indirect/ men are direct" guides the exchange of consent in normative heterosexual sexual encounters, as men are expected to be the one to initiate sex directly; to be the active party (Willis et al, 2020:53). Meanwhile, women are expected to respond to men's advances; to be the less active party. Thus, consent is often thought of as unidirectional; as given by women, and perceived and ensured by men. "Normalised gendered sociocultural pressures and assumptions" are responsible for some of the disconnect between ideal or legal definitions of consent in the abstract, and how consent is often practically carried out during sex (Setty, 2021: 333). Frequently, "men are conceptualized as sexual initiators and women as sexual gatekeepers" so according to expected gender roles, men should lead sex until they hear refusal from a woman (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013: 517). Regardless of gender, people tend to understand consent as something which men need to get from women, following heteronormative values and traditional gender roles (Willis et al, 2019: 60; Rollero & Roccato, 2023: 11). These behaviours reinforce gender roles during sex, maintain a male/ female active/passive binary, and may decrease the likelihood of women utilising more explicit verbal consent cues (Willis et al, 2019: 60). When consent is usually practised non-verbally, young men may simultaneously struggle to read cues given by women but feel an immense pressure to understand those cues, as they feel responsible for obtaining

consent (Setty, 2023:2). Boys involved in Setty's (2022:530) study explained that they worried about struggling to understand girls' cues and body language and they wanted someone to teach them exactly what to look for to help them understand these cues, showing a confusion but also a desire to practise consent well.

Secondly, many people believe that "people receiving sexual behaviours can consent by doing nothing" (Willis et al, 2020:53). Silence or passive acceptance is taken to mean that a person consents and this is more commonly associated with women as they are expected to be more sexually passive. Therefore, men may assume consent is given until they receive a 'no'. In heterosexual encounters, men more often initiate sex and so are more likely to use verbal consent to ask directly, meanwhile, women are more likely to show their consent via a lack of resistance (Willis et al, 2019: 60).

Rollero and Roccato (2023) found that men are more likely to perceive a lack of behavioural control and believe in more sexual consent norms, which can lead to a greater "endorsement of rape-supportive attitudes" (Rollero & Roccato, 2023: 11). Men may also subscribe to "token resistance beliefs", the belief that women will regularly playfully refuse sex when they actually want to accept (Shafer et al, 2018: 48). These beliefs can lead to increased instances of sexual violence when men with such beliefs assume that token resistance is so commonplace that when a woman refuses them they must be practising token resistance and will ignore their non-consent (Shafer et al, 2018: 48). Men also tend to assess women's actions and comments as carrying more sexual interest/ willingness than women report intending, known as the "over perception bias" (Rerick, Livingston & Davis, 2020; 520). For example, a woman may

invite a man to her home for a drink, intending to share a drink with him, whilst the man may interpret this as a hint for sex, and thus as consent to sex (Rerick, Livingston & Davis, 2020; 520). Rerick, Livingston and Davis' (2020) study showed that when men are sexually aroused, they would "interpret more sexual intent from women's behaviours" (p.530) thus, when they wanted sex they were more likely to (potentially inaccurately) assume that the woman wants it to. Young men observed by Setty (2023) also sometimes incorrectly "read sexual interest from signals" (p.9), only seeing what they want to see when they are hoping to engage sexually with a girl. In addition, men involved in a study by Newstrom, Harris and Miner (2021) found that men were more likely to perceive indirect cues as consent and interpret "statements about intoxication" as "indicative of consent by their female partners" (p.460).

Young men may also worry about false allegations, feel like the law is against them, and believe that women are instantly believed in cases of sexual assault or abuse and that women can reimagine sex they regret as non-consensual (Setty, 2023: 10). Although this is inaccurate, it is a worry which can cause a huge amount of anxiety for the young man in question and perpetuate rape myths (Setty, 2023: 10). However, men who have experienced sexual violence or non-consensual sex in the past are more likely to prioritise sexual consent in future (Rollero & Roccato, 2023: 11). In addition, there may not be a clear association between hypermasculinity and rape supportive attitudes, because whilst in some instances hypermasculinity can lead to sexual violence towards women, in other cases, it can result in an increased protectivity towards women (Shafer et al, 2018: 49).

Muehlenhard et al (2016: 465) argue that true consent to sex must be given without coercion or pressure. However, coercion can be subtle and pressures to partake in sexual acts can come from wider social norms existing outside of the individuals in question, therefore, coercion or pressure can take up one of the “grey areas” in sexual consent (Powell, 2008). Setty (2021) expressed concern at the results from studies showing that young adult girls often felt “subtle and overt forms of pressure or coercion” (p.336) from boys. Some forms of coercion may be more obviously recognised as such, for example, girls may experience threats from boys to release “already acquired” sext messages (sexually explicit text messages) and images unless the girls continue to send more (Setty, 2021: 336). If released without the girls’ consent with intent to cause harm these images would be ‘image-based abuse’, which has been criminalised in the UK since 2015. However, other girls studied reported feeling pressure to sext due to wider social beliefs that boys are more sexual and will lose interest if a girl refuses when asked to send sexual texts or photos (Setty, 2021: 336). This pressure is more subtle and originates from wider gendered sexual norms, rather than the boy specifically in question. Further to these findings, wider social expectations for young men to be more sexual and to be sexually demanding may also put pressure on these young men to behave more sexually than they would like to, and to be more sexually forward or dominant, to fulfil expectations.

Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras (2008) argue that young women may consent to unwanted sex due to complex social pressures placed on women in the 21st century. Due to a more mainstream “raunch culture” in the modern Western world, women may feel pressured to act more sexually or to fit pornographic trends (Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras, 2008: 387). “Rauch culture”, describes how ideals from mainstream

pornography and other forms of more sexually explicit media, have become engrained social norms, which are then felt and adhered to by young women; even those who do not view sexual media themselves. The researchers argue that these pressures are to the detriment of young women but are often “passed off as women’s sexual empowerment” and thus the objectification of women in the 21st century is excused as “pseudo-empowerment” (Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras, 2008: 387). Furthermore, they note that neo-liberal feminist ideals encourage women to personify the “Together Woman”, as theorised by Phillips (2000) (Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras, 2008: 388). The “Together Woman” is empowered and self-determining, and never a victim, as victimisation is seen as the result of a lack of personal agency. Therefore, measures to “safeguard young women’s sexual well-being” are removed and replaced “with a rhetoric of self-determination and personal responsibility that leads women to blame themselves for sexual vulnerability or victimization” (Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras, 2008: 388).

Gender roles with regard to heterosexual consent communication can also be damaging for men because when consent is understood as something men ask women, “consent is generally agreed to be implied for men”, and they are less likely to be asked for their consent (Shumlich & Fisher, 2020; 1114). Men may also struggle to refuse unwanted sex due to the assumption that men “want that activity at all times” and therefore may feel pressure to defend their masculinity by participating in unwanted sex (Kaestle, 2009:34). Schoolboys observed by Setty (2023) also expressed that they would agree to unwanted sex, or may initiate unwanted sex, because of the expectation that boys always want sex, so their “female partner would be offended if they said no or do not initiate” (p.2). Sternin’s (2022) comparison of

heterosexual and non-heterosexual men's experiences and perceptions of consent found that some assumptions about men and sex applied to both groups due to the pressure of traditional masculine gender roles. For all the men involved, they felt an assumption that men always want or are interested in sex, so consent is presumed to be implied, and they may have difficulties refusing sex (Sternin et al, 2022: 526). As gender roles are heteronormative and ideal masculinity is tied up with heterosexuality, these differences in experiences could be due to "compensatory behaviour such as oversubscribing to masculinity norms and enacting extreme masculine behaviours" (Sternin et al, 2022: 526).

2.3.3 Consent Norms and Relationship Status:

Researchers have found that relationship status and the length and commitment level of the relationships can impact consent practice, but there seems to be some disagreement as to the nature of the impact. Newstrom, Harris & Miner (2021) argue that "consent cues are likely to change over time as individuals in relationships get to know their partners better and develop a more intimate, ongoing relationship" (p455), thus they are likely to utilise more indirect and non-verbal consent cues in more intimate, longer-term relationships. This conflicts with their finding that indirect consent cues were more often used when there is "relationship uncertainty", so a lower quality relationship resulted in more non-verbal cues due to a reduced ability to communicate about sex (Newstrom, Harris & Miner, 2021: 461). However, participants in this study were asked "to put themselves into a fictitious scenario that involved the initial instance of sexual intercourse", so their responses may not reflect how they behave with their real partner (Newstrom, Harris & Miner, 2021: 461).

Graf and Johnson (2021: 450) argue that ambiguous cues are more likely to be accepted as evidence of consent in established, longer-term relationships, due to the precedent set by their sexual history. It has been argued that in longer-term relationships, explicit consent is not deemed necessary and individuals are more likely to assume that sex is permitted as the relationship status becomes increasingly committed (Willis et al, 2019). More often “people believe that being in a committed sexual relationship with a partner can decrease the need to communicate consent explicitly”, and sometimes, agreeing to be in a committed relationship can be perceived as giving consent (Willis, Murray & Jozkowski, 2021: 671-2). However, despite a perceived reliance on more indirect consent cues in longer-term relationships, sexual compliance, engaging in unwanted sex to please a partner, does not occur more often in longer-term relationships compared to shorter-term (Willis, Murray & Jozkowski, 2021: 682). These indirect consent cues may occur in a variety of ways, such as escalating behaviours, sex “just happening” or watching for signs of refusal (Willis, Murray & Jozkowski, 2021: 681). Therefore, people are more likely to prioritise more explicit consent if it is the first sexual contact with that person, or if the sexual relationship is newly established or not committed (Willis et al, 2019).

However, other studies have shown that in longer-term relationships, couples use more direct and verbal consent compared to casual relationships (Willis, Murray & Jozkowski, 2021: 671-2). This could be due to increased comfort over time, learning from experience and increased ability to communicate with each other generally, or lower fear of refusal (Willis, Murray & Jozkowski, 2021: 671-2). Thus, research has shown that relationship length and commitment impact consent strategy, however, there seems to be some disagreement as to the nature of this impact.

Understanding of sexual consent also shifts across different demographics. The primary aim of Graf and Johnson's (2021) study was to understand how consent is understood by people of different ages. They noted that amongst middle-aged and older adults, reported rates of sexual violence were lower compared to younger age groups, which could be due to an increased understanding of consent. However, they identified that the difference could also be the result of an increased likelihood of being married or in long-term established relationships, or a lack of reporting due to stigmas surrounding older people being sexually active (Graf and Johnson, 2021).

2.3.4 Consent Norms and Type of Sexual Behaviour:

Willis et al (2020)'s final listed norm of consent practice is: "lower order behaviours don't need explicit consent" (Willis et al, 2020:53). If explicit consent is utilised, it is only deemed necessary for higher order behaviours, the most intimate or invasive, such as penetration. For lower-order sexual acts, such as kissing or touching, which are deemed less intimate, it is often felt that explicit consent is not needed. (Willis et al, 2020:53; Willis & Smith, 2022). Thus, they are least likely to ask verbally before engaging in intimate touching, more likely to ask for vaginal penetration and most likely to ask for anal sex (Willis et al, 2019). Willis et al's (2019: 66) quantitative study of 707 US college students found that the use of verbal explicit consent increased from manual sex (22%), performing oral sex (42.8%), receiving oral sex (44.3%), vaginal-penile sex (57.4%), to anal sex (80.1%). In addition, the direction of sexual behaviour also influenced consent communication. Individuals more often verbalised consent for performing oral sex rather than receiving it, so they will more frequently ask to do

something than ask to receive, potentially because they feel more uncomfortable requesting pleasure (Willis & Smith, 2022).

Whether a sex act is defined as higher or lower order impacts the practice of consent (Willis, 2020). Thus, how normalised a sex act is considered, and how it is understood as higher or lower order, impacts the practice of consent (Contos, 2022). In our current Western culture, sex is often treated with suspicion and sexual pleasure alone is considered “bad unless a specific reason to exempt it has been established”; such reasons include “marriage, reproduction and love” (Rubin, 2007: 150). For sexual pleasure to be acceptable, it requires “pretexts that are unnecessary for other pleasures, such as the enjoyment of food, fiction, or astronomy” (Rubin, 2007: 150). Sex acts are thus arranged into a hierarchical system of acceptability and value, whereby heterosexual, monogamous, vanilla (normative, non-kinky) sex is often placed at the top, followed by committed homosexual couples and casual heterosexual sex and masturbation, with fetishism and sex work amongst those at the bottom (Rubin, 2007: 151). Although Rubin (2007) sets out this order as a typical hierarchy, the hierarchy is changeable amongst different groups and may be altered according to that group’s values. When an individual’s sexual behaviour falls lower on their society or group’s scale, they are more often “subjected to a presumption of mental illness, disreputability, criminality, restricted social and physical mobility, loss of institutional support, and economic sanctions” (Rubin, 2007: 151). The modern Western hierarchy is built upon a history of medical and psychological attempts to categorise and order sexual preferences. Texts such as Krafft-Ebing’s (2006) *Psychopathia Sexualis*, published in 1886, legitimised sexuality as an academic study, and provided some of our modern sexual labels and categories, however, it labelled

many of these as pathologies and provided a more concrete basis for oppression on the grounds of sexuality. Furthermore, historically normative sexuality has been gendered, with female sexuality considered as secondary to, or passive, in contrast to male sexuality (Weeks, 2023: 89).

Rubin (2007: 168) used the example of a famous historical sadomasochism (S/M) case (1967) to help explain this unfair treatment of those with desires considered low on the sexual hierarchy in a given time/place. In the case, a man was “convicted of aggravated assault for a whipping” in a filmed and consensual S/M scene, despite the absence of a “complaining victim”, the court ruled that a person “may not consent to an assault... except in a situation involving ordinary physical contact or blows incident to sports such as football, boxing, or wrestling”, as a person who would enjoy such an act is not “in possession of his full mental faculties” and therefore “legally incapable of consenting” (Rubin, 2007: 168). Rubin (2007: 168) expands that although S/M sex usually requires less force, and produces fewer injuries than football, the court ruled “that football players are sane, whereas masochists are not”, based on its subjective opinion that S/M sex is perverse and insane. Furthermore, Rubin (2007) notes that most people feel a need to “draw and maintain an imaginary line between good and bad sex” (p.152) to distinguish acceptable and unacceptable acts in the hierarchy. It is often feared that once the line is crossed, this may provoke a domino effect of increasing sexual permissiveness which may lead to chaos. However, different social groups will have differing hierarchies, and they will also ‘draw the line’ on this scale in different places.

One sex act which seems to have recently crossed the line into the acceptable or normalised side of the sexual hierarchy is the kink, erotic asphyxiation, commonly referred to as ‘choking’. A 2022 Guardian article expressed that the kink has made its way into the “mainstream umbrella” of sex acts with “58% of US female college students reporting having been choked during sex” (Contos, 2022). Unfortunately, now the act has been normalised, many young people do not think it requires explicit consent and are assuming that consent for this act is given “often the first time you’re sexually involved with them” (Contos, 2022). This example demonstrates that worryingly, when a sex act is normalised and widely considered to be on the “acceptable” side of the line in the sexual hierarchy, and thus considered to be lower order, explicit consent is less commonly asked for and prioritised. Therefore, this example showcases that when sexual behaviour is “mainstream” or “standard”, “it is too often assumed that consent is not necessary” (Contos, 2022). However, when a sex act is ‘taboo’ or ‘abnormal’, and thus higher order, informed, explicit consent is preferred. People are also more likely to communicate their consent directly and verbally for behaviours included in BDSM, or other less normative acts such as sex toy use, as this community centralises explicit consent (Willis & Smith, 2022: NP18924). I have created the diagram below to visually demonstrate this phenomenon.

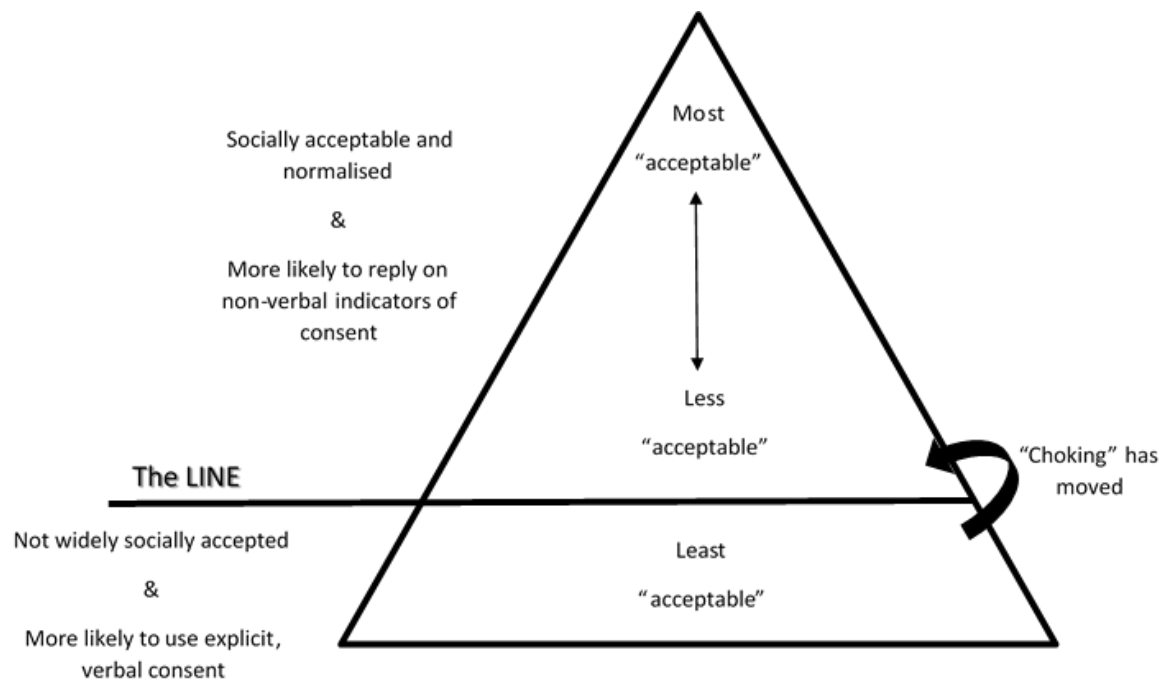


Figure 1: A diagram showing how sex acts can be organised into a hierarchy

2.4 Consent Practice Is Malleable and Can Be Influenced (Influencing Consent)

2.4.1 Consent Practice as a Fluid and Changeable Behaviour.

The section above has explored how different contextual factors can change how consent is communicated by individuals during real-world experiences. The way in which consent is often conceptualised is highly theoretical, simplistic and divorced from real-world experience because it assumes that consent can and should function the same way in all contexts. Consent in practice varies according to the specific individual and their circumstances. The differing consent norms according to identity, self-concept, relationship and type of sexual behaviour, show that unlike how consent is often conceptualised in theory, consent in practice is fluid and changeable. If consent practice is inconsistent according to contextual factors, this suggests that contextual factors can influence consent and consent itself is malleable. Factors which influence consent can have a positive or negative influence on an individual's consent

experiences. The section above has explored how contextual factors relating to the individual (their identity, sexual relationship and type of sex engaged in) can change their consent communication. However, it has also been argued that wider social objects, contextual factors external to the people having sex but which impacts them (such as media, peer opinions, and gender roles), can influence consent practice.

UK law can influence the choices individuals make about consent when they want to have positive, consensual experiences with others. UK law highlights that consent must be freely and knowingly given by someone who has capacity to make that choice and thus provides guidelines for acceptable behaviour (Graf and Johnson, 2021). Sex education can also influence values and behaviour regarding consent as individuals will be given different messages about consent depending on the extent of their sex education in school or at home and the values it shared (Setty, 2021; Burton et al, 2023; Rollero & Roccato, 2023). When sex education programmes tend to foreground the importance of following legal frameworks and the affirmative model in theory, discussions can follow simplistic ideas of what consent should be in theory rather than exploration of consent in practice or the nuance of consent in different contexts. Individuals are also likely to have learnt different messages about sex and consent from their unique social context, their peers, family, previous experiences and self-concept.

Media, including social media, has been argued to influence sexual behaviour including consent communication (Smith and Ortiz, 2023; Alexopoulos, Cingel and Stevens, 2024). The influence of social objects, such as the media, on consent norms

is often explored using sexual script theory and the argument that media is a source of sexual scripts which guide and influence sexual behaviours including consent. First theorised by Simon and Gagnon in 1973, sexual script theory offers a lens through which to understand sexual behaviours and the influences which drive them (Simon and Gagnon, 2002). They argue that “interpersonal scripts”, the models of behaviour enacted between individuals, draw “heavily on cultural scenarios”; certain patterns of behaviour may be more expected, and behaviours may be taken as symbolic of a certain personality or position in society (Simon and Gagnon, 2002: 31). Simon and Gagnon (2002) argue that through experience, an individual will often develop a “formula” which achieves adequate sexual pleasure, performance and positive social response and “pararitualise that formula” (p.33) (repeat the behaviours through habit). Scripts can be fluid, vary by circumstance and constructed with agency, but can be inspired by the cultural scenarios observed (Simon and Gagnon, 2002).

Sexual scripts relating to consent may be obtained from contexts such as peers, family or school (particularly sex education lessons) (Sun et al, 2014: 985; Marshall et al: 2021, 5217; Simon and Gagnon, 2002). It has been argued that pornography is the most influential form of media in this regard. Sun et al (2014) conducted an analysis of a large group of college aged young men, to investigate the impact of pornography on their sexual behaviours. They argue that pornography “as a core element of sexual socialisation” produces a sexual script which guides what sexual behaviour ‘should’ look like (Sun et al, 2014: 985). They argue that consumers of pornography then use these “pornographic sexual scripts” to “navigate real-world sexual experiences and guide sexual expectations”; this is not often conscious, primarily done through “habit” (Sun et al, 2014: 985). Although pornography is designed as a fantasy, their study’s

findings were consistent “with a theory suggesting that pornography can become a preferred sexual script for men, thus influencing their real-world expectations” (Sun et al, 2014: 990). They suggest that young men may also experience confusion when the messages received about sex from pornography conflict with messages from school or families (Sun et al, 2014: 984).

Marshall et al (2021)'s research explored the relationship between pornography use and sexual coercion amongst young men in college. During their study, they discovered a correlation between porn consumption and sexually coercive behaviours, and from this concluded that porn enabled the production of sexual scripts which include coercive behaviours and are thus followed to produce coercive behaviours (Marshall et al, 2021). They argue that consumers of porn create sexual scripts based on the content of the porn they are watching, and thus, if they are watching mainstream porn containing harmful “traditional gender role scripts”, they are likely to replicate these scripts in their own behaviours (Marshall et al, 2021: 5218). However, sexual script theory can be limited when exploring the influence of contextual factors on sexual behaviours such as consent because it removes individuals' agency, considers sexual behaviours as fixed, and does not consider the complex impact of experience on their values and desires.

2.4.2 Debating the Influence of Pornography on Consent Practices:

Debates on the impact of porn on sexual behaviour are often polar and theoretical. The controversial topic will provoke opinions based moral, religious or political viewpoints; however, little research considers the consumer's feelings or perspectives

on pornography (Weinberg et al, 2010: 1389). The present study utilises a definition of contemporary pornography as established by Ashton et al (2019). Pornography is made of three component parts: it must contain sexually explicit material, the material should be created with the intention to arouse the consumer with the consent of those involved in the production process, and the user needs to subjectively identify the object as porn (Ashton, 2019: 144). Largely, public debates about pornography have sought to determine whether porn is a wholly positive or negative force, rooted in wider general sex-positive or sex-negative sentiments (Smith and Attwood, 2014: 11). Such debates tend to generalise and unhelpfully reduce pornography and sexuality to a positive-negative dichotomy, ignoring nuance and context (Downing, 2013: 92). In the field of sexuality studies there is a volume of research which debates if pornography influences sexual behaviours such as consent and whether this influence could be considered helpful or harmful.

A volume of work has argued that pornography does guide behaviour and this guidance is harmful. Three main areas of concern explored in previous research are the relationships between porn consumption and increased sexual aggression, increased sexual pressure, and increased sexual risk-taking, all of which can influence consent communication (Shor and Seida, 2019; Terán and Dajches, 2020; Peter and Valkenburg, 2016). However, studies investigating the impact of these concerns on behaviour (if harmful attitudes demonstrated in pornography results in harmful behaviour perpetuated by the consumer) are often inconclusive. There are also understandable concerns about pornography contributing to the objectification of women both in pornographic media and impacting wider attitudes (Mikkola, 2019).

Potential Negative Effect: Increased Sexual Aggression:

Within academia, professions and the wider public, there is an understandable concern that pornography consumption can lead to increased sexual aggression. Multiple studies have conducted content analysis to consider the extent of violence towards women in contemporary mainstream pornography. Shor and Seida (2019: 16) note that the prevalence of violence in porn is reported in widely different volumes due to differing ideas about what constitutes a violent act. For example, consensual spanking may be interpreted as violent by some researchers and non-violent by others (Klaassen & Peter, 2015: 730). Newspapers and articles often share stories of increasingly violent pornography which “continues to move in the direction of, rougher, harder, and more violent materials” however, whether consumers prefer this increasingly violent content is contested (Shor and Seida, 2019: 18-19).

Although there are concerns about the prevalence of aggression in mainstream porn, there is a lack of consensus as to whether this translates to sexual aggression amongst consumers (Peter and Valkenburg, 2016: 522). Fritz and Paul (2017: 642) comment that previous studies have shown an association between porn consumption, sexual aggression, sexism, and as a result, violence towards women. However, mixed findings have also been discovered regarding the impact of pornography on rates of sexual aggression or instances of sexual harassment, so there is not a consensus across the field (Peter and Valkenburg, 2016: 522). Ybarra and Mitchell (2005) found that among males who have “predisposing risk levels” towards aggressive sexual behaviour, those who frequently consume pornography have more than four times greater levels of sexual aggression, however, for the

majority of men there is no link between porn use and sexual aggression, therefore, the impact of pornography was heavily dependent on individual context (Owens et al, 2012: 483).

Malamuth, Addison and Koss (2000) found that contemporary research seemed to both prove and disprove that porn use increases sexually aggressive behaviours in men and tried to investigate why this might be happening. They identified one of the issues with the existing body of research being a use of “over-simplistic models” and a lack of attention to context, and individual circumstances (Malamuth, Addison and Koss, 2000: 54). They only found a correlation between higher porn use and men who had risk characteristics for sexual aggression unlinked to porn use, such as “self-reported attraction to sexual aggression, hostile masculinity and/or low intelligence” (Malamuth, Addison and Koss, 2000: 55). It may be that these men are more readily influenced by media, or that they are more likely to seek out more violent media, and thus the correlation does not necessarily equate to causation (Malamuth, Addison and Koss, 2000: 55). Thus, they found that pornography can amplify aggressive tendencies in some men but has no impact on those who would not otherwise have any aggressive tendencies. In a later paper, Malamuth (2018) noted that claims about the link between porn use and sexual aggression are highly polarised, with some stating that porn use directly results in sexually aggressive behaviour, and others stating that there is no link or that porn use decreases rates of sexual assault (Malamuth, 2018:74). They found that the relationship between porn use and sexual aggression was more complex than often explored. They argue that “pornography use by itself is not likely to cause people to commit sexual aggression”, however, “in interaction with other risk factors that predispose certain individuals to be at more at

risk for sexual aggression”, exposure to non-consenting porn may increase the risk of “aggressive outcomes”, and therefore, exposure may function as “a “tipping point” that leads a person at risk who might not act aggressively to actually commit a sexually aggressive offence” (Malamuth, 2018:87).

Potential Negative Effect: Increased Sexual Pressure:

Regarding consent specifically, Terán and Dajches (2020) investigated the link between pornography use and sexual refusal assertiveness (someone’s confidence and ability to refuse unwanted sex) amongst college students and found that those who consumed more porn felt less able to refuse unwanted sex. They argue that porn shows young people what to expect during sex and what is ‘normal’, so if pornography does not explicitly show consent, young people may not understand that this is important (Terán and Dajches, 2020: 2099). Thus, they suggest that porn influenced the participants’ ability to give and refuse consent. They argue that porn shows young people what to expect during sex and what is ‘normal’, so if pornography does not explicitly show consent, young people may not understand that this is important (Terán and Dajches, 2020: 2099).

Moreover, Tholander et al (2022: 1827) explored how a group of Swedish women engaged with pornography and how they used pornography as a “frame of reference for their own and their partner’s sexual actions and performances”. They identified that the typical “pornographic script” does not prioritise consent or female pleasure, which results in women prioritising their male partners’ desires and pleasure over their own (Tholander et al, 2022: 1827). Interestingly, many of the women consulted, described

their desire to have more “equal sex” but this desire was overruled by the pressure to please a male partner (Tholander et al, 2022: 1828). When mainstream porn depicts women as always willing to have sex, some women participating in the study expressed that they would often initiate “unwanted sexual practices” without being aroused or wanting sex themselves (Tholander et al, 2022: 1832).

Potential Negative Effect: Increased Risk Taking:

Peter and Valkenburg’s (2016) review considered the research into porn use and sexual risk-taking but found mixed evidence, with some studies showing a correlation and others no correlation. The review considered papers which investigated a variety of sexual practises, from condom use, casual sex and sexting, which Peter and Valkenburg (2016, 522) then grouped as “sexual risk behaviour”. One issue in trying to correlate pornography use and sexual risk is that the definition of such is subjective, and different acts may be categorised as risky or safe depending on the researcher. Furthermore, a sex act may be risky or safe depending on how it is practised, for example, casual sex may be made safe via condoms, STI testing, communication and consent. McCormack and Wignall (2017:977) note that “studies have documented how exposure to pornography is associated with a range of sexual activities deemed ‘risky’, including anal sex or sex with multiple partners”, and expose that “particularly problematic in this argument are the assumptions underpinning the conceptualization of ‘risky’ sex, where risk is associated with particular types of sexual activity with no attention paid to safe-sex practises”. Pornography has also been found to increase sexual repertoire, which can be interpreted as positive or negative, depending on the

values of the researcher; whether the study is sex-positive or sex-negative (Weinberg et al, 2010: 1390).

Pornography and Objectification:

One of the factors often measured in feminist judgements of pornography is the degree to which it contributes to the objectification of women. Smith and Attwood (2014) produced a summary of the key feminist perspectives on pornography. Largely, public debates about pornography have sought to determine whether porn is a wholly positive or negative force, rooted in wider general sex-positive or sex-negative sentiments (Smith and Attwood, 2014: 11). Such debates tend to generalise and unhelpfully reduce pornography and sexuality to a positive-negative dichotomy, ignoring nuance and context (Downing, 2013: 92).

Furthermore, Klaassen and Peter's (2015) content analysis considered the prevalence of gender inequality in porn, considering the objectification, subordination and violence towards women. Objectification was clearly defined as having two components: instrumentality (the emphasis on body parts to be used as a tool and object for pleasure), and dehumanisation (whether the characters had sexual agency, feelings and pleasure) (Klaassen & Peter, 2015: 725). Objectification may be demonstrated in pornographic videos by showing a close-up of the genitals or the sex act only, without showing the whole person. Objectification was a feature of the 400 mainstream videos they reviewed regardless of gender and although women were depicted as "sexually subordinate", they were not dehumanised (Klaassen & Peter, 2015: 730). In contrast, Fritz and Paul (2017) argue that their review of 300 videos showed that women are

more frequently objectified in mainstream pornography than men, although this is less common in pornography designed for women.

Anti-porn feminists will “critique pornography for being a major force in women’s sexual objectification” (Mikkola, 2019: 123). When an individual is objectified, their humanity is removed and they are treated like an object, to be used and viewed without any autonomy or agency (Mikkola, 2019: 125). In contrast, feminist porn producers aim to counter “exploitative mainstream industrial pornography” and “represent female sexuality more authentically”, showing women to be equal agents during sex (Mikkola, 2019: 142). Feminist porn makers will take the stance that pornography is not fundamentally objectifying towards women but many mainstream videos can be, and thus, they offer an alternative.

Overall, there is a breadth of research which considers the relationship between pornography and behaviour. However, pornography is a diverse social object, and different examples of pornography and the differing contexts in which they are consumed, will produce different impacts, which could be interpreted as harmful or healthy. Potentially, the diverse nature of pornography could account for the diverse and thus inconsistent findings with regards to the influence of pornography.

Challenging the link between pornography and harmful sexual behaviour:

Arguments that porn has a harmful impact on sexual behaviour and consent practice may be undermined by other research which is inconclusive regarding the degree of

impact. In addition, porn-critical studies are also often positivist, quantitative research projects, which do not consider the impact of individual context, experience and agency, instead searching for a simple model of correlation between porn consumption and behaviour. A thorough literature review conducted by McKee et al (2020: 14-15) found no agreement across the literature as to whether increased porn consumption leads to better or worse attitudes towards sexual consent or practise of sexual consent. They note that research into the potential effects of pornography consumption will often consider the prevalence of violent behaviours such as “sexually aggressive behaviour”, “violence against women” or “sexual assault” but do not investigate consent practise explicitly, which they argue is problematic “given the centrality of consent to all healthy sexual practise” (McKee et al, 2020: 17).

Moreover, Koletić et al (2021)’s study found that 41.3% of Norwegian adults (from a random sample of 4160 adults aged 18-89) did not believe that porn affected their sex life, 33.2% thought it had a positive impact, and 25.5% thought it had a negative impact. This demonstrates a large variance in consumers’ perceived impact of porn on their sexual behaviours. Furthermore, Owen et al’s (2012) review of the research regarding the impact of pornography on adolescents, found an “agreement in the literature suggesting that adolescents can learn sexual behaviours from observing the behaviours depicted in sexually explicit material” (p.391). Yet these impacts have been found to be both positive and negative, as the material “might serve as a source of knowledge” but could also “distort their images” or expectations of sexuality (Owens et al, 2012: 391). Peter and Valkenburg (2016) conducted a review of twenty years of research into the impacts of porn on adolescents and reported a large variance in findings resulting in their concluding that porn was “related to sexual attitudes and

some sexual behaviours, but causality unclear” (p.523). They note that research relating to impacts tends to refer to two main categories of attitudes: “permissive sexual attitudes”, referring to positive attitudes towards casual, uncommitted sex, and “gender-stereotypical sexual beliefs” (Peter and Valkenburg, 2016:519).

As demonstrated above, a volume of research has been conducted with the aim of showing a link between pornography consumption and negative effects on sexual behaviour and consent. However, the degree to which it has an influence on behaviour and the degree to which that impact is negative is contested. Arguments made that pornography has a harmful influence can be undermined by the “negative effects paradigm”, a methodological shortcoming identified by McCormack and Wignall (2017). McCormack and Wignall (2017) argue that a large volume of research has explored possible links between porn use and different potential harms “at the expense of other outcomes that could occur” (p.967), thus, they investigate negative impacts only, rather than all impacts, creating a disproportionate volume of literature on the links between pornography and negative impacts. In contrast, McCormack and Wignall’s (2017) study considered a “broader range of experiences” (p.975) and considered all possible impacts of pornography, regardless of whether these could be considered positive or negative.

McCormack and Wignall (2017) also contested the methodological validity of studies contributing to the negative effects paradigm, as “negative effects have only been found in laboratory conditions” (p.978) which do not reflect the real-world conditions within which pornography is consumed. Largely quantitative studies seeking to link

porn and risky sexual behaviour can be limited in their methodologies because they produce simplistic correlations between behaviours, without consideration of individual context and agency. Studies within the negative effects paradigm often utilise an oversimplified version of sexual script theory as their underpinning theoretical framework, arguing that individuals acquire sexual scripts from the porn they consume. McCormack and Wignall (2017: 979) also note that arguments relating to the negative effects of pornography are undermined by the large volume of research showing inconclusive impacts, no impact or positive impacts, showing that pornography does not always have a wholly negative impact.

Furthermore, Weinberg et al (2010) note that a key problem in the study of pornography and its impact on consumers is that depending on the values of the researcher and their moral belief that pornography is either good or bad, they will often either only select examples of pornography which are unethically or ethically created, and then inaccurately expand their findings about a specific type of pornography to support universal judgements about the nature of all pornography. Instead, findings from porn studies should be limited to conclusions about the type of pornography used in the sample only.

2.4.3 Pornography as A Tool to Aid Active Reflection About Sexual Experience:

This thesis suggests that arguments that porn guides sexual behaviour because consumers passively copy from the pornography they view, are limited and overly simplistic. Instead, consumers, as active agents, may decide to utilise information about sex gleaned from porn in their own sexual experiences. McCormack and Wignall

(2017) suggested that people do not passively copy from the porn they consume. Instead, individuals actively interpret and engage with pornography with agency, reflecting on the materials and deciding what aspects (if any) they would like to incorporate into their sexual experiences or they may turn to porn to explore and reflect on their desires (McCormack and Wignall, 2017). Individuals may use porn to explore their desires and learn new sexual information. The information learnt from porn is not learnt in isolation, the individual will actively consider this alongside other influences such as their partner, their self-concept and wider social norms. Thus, pornography could be used as a tool to facilitate active reflection about sexual experiences and desires.

Although pornography remains a controversial topic it may influence consent practice in a useful way, by increasing sexual knowledge, sexual self-understanding and allowing consumers to think about sex explicitly and directly. Pornography is one of the few explicit sources where people can find information on the mechanics of sex, as well as different bodies and desires (Philpott, Singh and Gamlin, 2017: 107). When consent is defined abstractly in education settings, pornography may provide explicit examples of consent within a sexual context to aid discussions (Bragg et al, 2021; Setty, 2022). There may be a “knowledge-based defence of pornography”, whereby pornography can give information about what sex looks like, and the logistics, expand sexual repertoire, allow people to explore their identities and desires in private and facilitate arousal and pleasure (Mikkola, 2019: 124). Pornography has been used for educational aims in the past, such as to encourage condom use during the HIV/AIDs epidemic (Leonard, 2012). Furthermore, some porn producers, such as ethical and

feminist porn producers, have created educational porn which foregrounds an educational message alongside the arousing content (Philpott, Singh and Gamlin, 2017; Dawson et al, 2022).

When sex education lessons focus on risk prevention and do not address sex directly, young people may turn to porn to understand what sex can look like, especially acts beyond vaginal intercourse. Studies have found that pornography is a significant source of sex information amongst young people because it is more easily available, expansive and explicit than other sources of sex information (Litsou et al, 2021: 236). Sex education lessons are also often overly biological and therefore, porn becomes one of the few places where young people can gather information on sexual pleasure (Litsou et al, 2021: 237). Back in 1991, Duncan and Donnelly (1991:68), investigated the role of pornography in the sex education of a sample of students at a university in midwestern USA. They found that amongst the male students, porn was ranked as the fourth most important source of sex information, out of seven possible sources, making it important but not the most used source. However, oral and anal sex were the most common topics for which “pornography was reported as being a significant source of information, both by women (42 or 41.5%) and by men (43 or 65.1%)” potentially due to the absence of these topics in school-based sex education programmes which largely focus on heterosexual vaginal sex only (Duncan and Donnelly, 1991:68). If young people turn to porn when their sex education is lacking it suggests that they have not learnt about sex from their parents, peers or other sources instead. Litsou et al’s (2021) systematic review found that young people often learn the mechanics of sex, practical information about what different sex acts might look like, both for

partnered sexual activities and masturbation from porn (Litsou et al, 2021: 245). Pornography can also “provide information regarding body function, genital aesthetic, sexual identity, and understanding of queer sexuality” (Dawson et al, 2022:1257). Porn can also inform consumers about the wide range of sexual experience. Potentially, for some, the more frequently an individual consumes pornography, the wider range of sexual behaviours they will consider ‘normal’, because the wide variety of sex acts shown in porn leads to the normalisation of a range of acts which may have been previously considered odd (Weinberg et al, 2010: 1391).

“Educational porn”, is a genre of pornography, whereby the material is created with the dual intent to arouse and educate. It is created to encourage reflection about sexual experience for the purpose of education. Pornography which is created to promote physically and emotionally safer sex, alongside arousing content, could help to educate viewers on these practices and understand what they might look like in an explicitly sexual context (Philpott, Singh and Gamlin, 2017: 100). Mixing the erotic and the educational can show that safe sex, physically and emotionally, can and should be a part of pleasurable sex. Dawson et al (2022) highlights that “some pornography includes educational elements that focus on enhancing sexual pleasure and facilitating safer sex practise” (p.1259), these might highlight steps to heighten pleasure or improve sexual communication. Dawson et al (2022) highlights the “CrashPad series by Pink and White Productions (2016)” which “portrays sexual negotiation strategies and the use of safewords as part of Bondage, Dominance, and Sadoomasochism (BDSM) practises” (p.1259). Some educational porn is created to teach sexual

technique and increase pleasure during sex, such as “Nina Hartley's Guide to Better Cunnilingus” (Albury, 2014:175).

Sexuality education programmes designed for adults have successfully drawn on pornographic media to “promote sexual learning” regarding a holistic range of safer sex practises from condom use to communication strategies (Albury, 2014: 173). Porn, as part of an educational programme or platform, has led to increased engagement with the educational messages (Albury, 2014: 175). Porn can situate conversations in an explicitly sexual context and aid reflection. Albury (2014) notes that an Australian project targeting “sexually adventurous women” (p.175), *iloveclaudio*, successfully utilised images from soft-core porn to support safer-sex messages. The pornographic material engaged the target audience, using imagery from Australia's sexual sub-cultures, making the educational messages appear more relatable and pleasurable. Interviews and insights from experts also ensured that the educational messages were not detached from the sexual activities and pleasures explored (Albury, 2014: 175). Furthermore, artists and sex educators explored the educational potential of pornography in the art project “Porn as Pedagogy”, showcased at the Tate Modern (Dawson, 2018:91). The work explored feminist porn, consent and desire, and showed diverse acts and performers, and was only shown after a long battle with lawyers due to the sexually explicit nature of the art (Dawson, 2018:91).

Studies have shown that pornography showing condom use, encourages condom use amongst viewers (Philpott, Singh and Gamlin, 2017: 105). Yet, different people are

likely to take different things from educational porn, according to their existing sexual tastes and worldviews (Albury, 2014:178). Pornographic materials were prominently successfully utilised in the safer sex campaigns associated with the HIV/AIDs crisis of the 1980s/90s (Leonard, 2012). During this period, Australian campaigns developed a new “safe-sex aesthetic”, which “packaged safe-sex information in ways that were sex positive and appealing to the target audience” (Leonard, 2012: 835). The use of the pornographic in the campaigns depicted condom use as homoerotic and as a part of pleasurable sexual experiences, to reduce fears that safe sex may be less pleasurable (Leonard, 2012: 836). In addition, the aesthetic of the campaigns helped to normalise condom use within the gay male community by showing that safe sex could be a part of a “shared gay identity” (Leonard, 2012: 836). The pornographic elements draw the viewer in with the promise of pleasure and encourages those who may not otherwise seek safe-sex information to view sex education materials (Leonard, 2012: 839). Many people think of safe sex as dull or less pleasurable, therefore, utilising pornographic material in safe-sex campaigns helped to challenge these assumptions (Leonard, 2012: 841). Effective campaigns utilising the “safe-sex aesthetic” include “Rubba me” in 1984, one the first HIV prevention campaigns in Australia, a poster series by the AIDS Council of New South Wales (ACON) in 1992 and posters by the Victorian AIDS Council (VAC) in 2007 (Leonard, 2012). However, some people have protested the use of the pornographic in this health information as an over-eroticisation of gay male cultures, which may further sexual stereotypes about gay men (Albury, 2014: 175).

Individuals may also actively reflect on pornography for personal exploration of their own sexual desires, to discover new possible sexual experiences and acts and to investigate if they find them, at least in theory, arousing (Dawson et al, 2022: 1265). The men in Dawson et al's (2022) study reported mostly using porn to find out about penetrative sexual acts such as different sex positions, however, the women explored a range of sexual fantasies such as role play or aspects of BDSM. Pornography can also provide a safe space to explore kinks and fetishes and help viewers to understand their sexual desires (McCormack and Wignall, 2017:986). Thus, pornography can facilitate and aid personal reflection about an individual's sexuality and desires.

Educational porn and sex educators using pornography as a resource, have used the fact that individuals can actively use pornography as a tool to reflect on sexual experiences, to aid their educational aims. Thus, pornography can be and has been used by consumers to aid reflection, in educational contexts to prompt thought about safe sex practices or communication, or as an individual, to explore desires, aid self-discovery and uncover new ideas. Therefore, it was deemed appropriate to use pornography in the methodology of the present study to help facilitate and encourage a process of reflection about sexual experience, specifically consent, amongst the participants.

This section has shown how previous literature has debated the degree to which pornography influences sexual behaviours including consent. A higher quantity of studies argue that porn has a detrimental impact on sexual behaviour, encouraging harmful sexual behaviours and discouraging thorough consent practice. However,

many of these studies are undermined by what McCormack and Wignall (2017) have termed the “negative effects paradigm”, a methodological shortcoming whereby studies find more negative impacts because their research questions only seek negative impacts. Individuals are not passively compelled to copy behaviours from porn, instead they use porn to reflect and decide with agency to take influence from porn, reflecting on the content alongside their own desires and other contextual factors (McCormack and Wignall, 2017). Therefore, McCormack and Wignall’s (2017) critique of the negative effects paradigm functions as reassurance that it is unlikely that embedding pornography into the research design will have any dire negative impacts on the study participants. Furthermore, educational porn or porn in educational settings serves as an exemplar case for porn used actively by individuals as a tool to aid reflection. Individuals can use porn to aid sexual learning, either about safe sex or understanding their own desires, because they can reflect on the materials, compare them to their own experiences, and actively consider the usefulness of the information to their sexual wellbeing alongside information from other influences such as their peer group or wider norms or expectations. Thus, this thesis suggests that potentially as an explicit resource, pornography could be used to encourage reflection about sexual experience, particularly experiences of consent, and the tool was embedded into the methodology.

2.4.4 Problematising Production Within the Porn Industry:

The above sections have considered the potential impacts of pornography on consumers; to what degree it can be argued that porn guides behaviours and justifies the inclusion of pornography in the methodology of the present study. Findings from

studies about the link between pornography consumption and increased harmful sexual behaviour have been inconsistent and show a need to consider nuance and the impact of different contexts (Cawston, 2019). Similarly, the issues regarding the processes of porn production and the porn industry on performers also need to be considered with nuance, because the impacts will be different across the wide range of contexts in which people create porn. Concerns regarding porn production can relate to illegal harms within the industry, the prevalence of injury and disease, violence towards women, and issues of consent and the degree to which performers can freely choose to take part. These harmful circumstances can occur in some porn production contexts and need be challenged but are not a part of all performers' experiences of the porn industry.

Within the mainstream porn industry, there are recorded instances of illegal harms including: sexual exploitation, abuse of underage performers, violence against women and trafficking (Taylor, 2018). Furthermore, Cawston (2019) argues that the process of producing pornography requires physical or medical harm to the performers. Cawston (2019: 627) suggests that feminist critiques of pornography should focus on the harms caused by its production: violence, abuse and exploitation of women behind the scenes and the physical damages caused by “sexually transmitted diseases” and “injuries”. In addition, the consent of porn performers to engage in the industry is vital. The consent of the characters shown in the film, and the consent of the real porn actors, need to be considered separate concerns. The presence of a scripted agreement in a porn video does not ensure that consent was properly agreed behind the scenes. Similarly, a pornographic video may present a fantasy which is narratively

non-consensual, however, the actors themselves may have given thorough informed consent behind the scenes. Even in the case of thorough consent processes behind the scenes there are also factors which can limit individuals' freedom to choose or circumstances which make their participation in pornography more likely such as poverty or a history of abuse (Boyle, 2011).

Moreover, it has been argued that the presence of consent can be used as an excuse to justify the unfair treatment of women in pornographic films, and that consent is not enough to justify this treatment as the presentation impacts more women than just those performing in the video by influencing general expectations of women. Whisnant (2016) argues that consent cannot be used as an excuse to allow humiliation to occur in online pornography and that by using the presence of performer consent as a justification, humiliation in porn is not adequately critiqued. The presence of consent in pornographic videos containing the humiliation of women, plays into a male fantasy whereby the women love being degraded and may influence expectations of women outside of pornography (Whisnant, 2016: 2). Furthermore, the fact that the female performers involved in humiliation porn have consented to the scene may increase the humiliation as they are then presumed to have little self-worth or dignity for allowing such humiliation to occur; they do not experience the sympathy extended to those who are non-consensually humiliated (Whisnant, 2016: 4). In summary, Whisnant (2016) argues that in humiliation porn, the presence of consent increases the humiliation of the performer and negative sentiments towards women generally. However, Whisnant (2016) does not consider the instances where humiliation may be genuinely enjoyed

by the recipient, such as in kink or fetish contexts, in which cases humiliation and consent may not function in the same way.

Freedom and capacity to choose and consent to take part in pornography has been highlighted by some feminists as a key differentiator between contexts where production is harmful and where it is no more harmful than any other industry, or may even be considered empowering (Cawston, 2019). However, Cawston (2019) takes the opposing feminist stance, and believes that “appeals to the legitimating rhetoric of choice, and casting pornography as a healthy sexual expression that contributes to women’s sexual (and economic) liberation” (the aims of feminist porn makers), is an “appropriation” of feminist ideas (Cawston, 2019: 625).

The ‘damaged goods hypothesis’ states that female porn performers have higher rates of mental health problems, drug use and experiences of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) than average, which limit their freedom and capacity to consent (Griffith et al, 2012). Griffith et al (2012) found that in some areas (likelihood to have more sexual partners, earlier sexual debut, rates of drug abuse and worry about sexually transmitted diseases) prevalence was higher than average amongst women involved with porn. Yet, they also found porn actresses to have no difference in prevalence of CSA compared to other women, higher self-esteem, more social support, sexual satisfaction and spirituality (Griffith et al, 2012). Thus, their findings did not support the damaged goods hypothesis and found examples of women in porn experiencing similar to average wellbeing to other women, highlighting their agency and capacity to

choose (Griffith et al, 2012). In addition, Yaakovovitch, Bensimon, and Idisis' (2024) interviews with male amateur pornography performers found a complex range of circumstances and motivations to enter the industry, such as increased prevalence of CSA or unmet childhood needs, as well as motivations suggesting agency such as a challenging misperception about sex and "promoting education for healthy sexuality and gender equality" (Yaakovovitch, Bensimon, and Idisis, 2024: abstract). They also actively developed strategies to cope with the stigma and health risks which accompany involvement with the porn industry (Yaakovovitch, Bensimon, and Idisis, 2024). Their study suggests that motivations were driven by personal ideology and free choice, challenging the idea of porn performers as victims (Yaakovovitch, Bensimon, and Idisis, 2024). Thus, porn production is a nuanced and varied industry, producing contexts which are harmful towards some performers, whilst other performers feel they have agency and are satisfied.

Therefore, pornography is a nuanced social object, with a diverse range of content and processes of production. Whilst there are cases where pornography can be harmful to the consumers or performers, there are also alternative experiences of healthy porn consumption and ethical production. Examples of pornographic films which explicitly showcase consent were selected for the present study, as helpful tools to aid reflection and discussion about consent in a controlled research environment.

2.5 Theories of Sexuality and Gender as Lenses to View Consent (Unpacking ‘men who have sex with women’)

Young men who have sex with women, the group addressed by the present study, may face norms and pressures which are unique to the intersectional relationship between their being men, heterosexual or otherwise interested in women, and young. The unique pressures faced by this group may shape their experiences, how they behave sexually presently and in future, and thus how they practise consent. This section shall explore some theories of how sexuality and gender can be framed and understood. These can be useful lenses through which to view and understand consent because consent is impacted by gender and sexuality and is an aspect of sexual behaviour.

2.5.1 Sex-Critical Approaches to Sexualities Research:

This thesis explores sexuality and sexual behaviour from a “sex-critical” stance, as defined by Downing (2013), which suggests that “all forms of sexuality should be equally susceptible to critical thinking about the normative or otherwise ideologies they uphold” (p.95). Thus, to argue that any form of sexuality is wholly positive or negative is highly simplified and inaccurate, as it can serve a different function and have different impacts across individuals and communities. The dichotomy also makes “invisible the varieties of asexuality and those non-genital ‘bodies and pleasures’ (to use a Foucauldian term) that do not fit so neatly under the ‘sexuality’ umbrella” (Downing, 2013: 95). However, definitions of sex-positivity have highlighted sex’s potential to be a positive force and the opposition towards the regulation or censorship of sexual practice. These definitions do not seem to suggest that sex is always

positive, in a reductive argument, but instead suggest that it can be positive and freedoms should be encouraged (Smith and Attwood, 2014: 13).

2.5.2 Queering Heterosexuality and Heteronormativity:

This thesis understands sexual behaviours as socially constructed and shaped by social factors and histories (Weeks, 2023: 19). Constructionist approaches, as taken by this thesis, argue that whilst desires and sexual functions may have biological components, the way sex is understood, institutionalised and experienced, is social and changeable (Rubin, 2007: 149). Most influentially, Foucault (1998), retheorised sexuality in his 1970s book “The History of Sexuality” to argue that attitudes towards sex are specific to a culture and time and change across history. As sexual attitudes and common practices change across societies, “sex is always political” (Rubin, 2007: 143). In contrast, much of current Western thought about sex is based on “sexual essentialism - the idea that sex is a natural force that exists prior to social life and shapes institutions”, that sexuality as it is currently categorised and perceived, is innate and has “always been” (Rubin, 2007:149). The notion that sex is “eternally unchanging, asocial, and transhistorical” dominates most medical and psychological explorations of sex (Rubin, 2007:149).

Heterosexuality is a category of sexual identity and is broader than simply sexual attraction towards a different gender as there are expectations and norms about how that sexuality be performed. Heteronormativity is used to refer to the positioning of heterosexuality as the most ‘normal’ sexuality, which has led to discrimination for LGBTQ+ people, and can be limiting and harmful to heterosexual people. The belief

that heterosexuality is natural and innate, helps heteronormativity to flourish (Plummer, 2005). Calls to reproductive biology legitimise the dominance of heteronormative ideals under the guise that they are scientifically valid, innate, and immovable (Plummer, 2005). However, heteronormativity includes values and behaviours beyond heterosexual sexual desire such as marriage or the nuclear family, which are socially constructed and undermine the belief that heteronormativity is 'natural' (Plummer, 2005). Heteronormative sex, following the norms and ideals of heterosexual behaviour, is "not simply to enjoy having sex with women" (for men), it is "narrativised sex: sex with a goal, a purpose and a product" (Thomas, 2000: 32-33). That product is often the child, which is not just the product of sex, but its justification (Thomas, 2000: 32-33; Rubin, 2007: 150).

Foucault (1998) explains that prior to the work of early 19th-century sexologists, sexuality was not labelled and categorised in discourse as it is today; sex acts are as old as history but sexual identities are not. Whereas previously, individual identity was not connected to sexual acts, from this point, discourses shaped sexualities as identities (Foucault, 1998). The early sexologists created a variety of labels for sexual desires they deemed pathological or immoral and extended those labels to describe the whole person (Foucault, 1998). Therefore, rather than an isolated sex act being discriminated against, a whole person could be considered wrong, illegal, immoral and worthy of harsh discrimination due to their sexual preferences. For example, the man who engaged in sodomy became the homosexual, the person who engaged in flagellation became the masochist, and the woman who engaged in frequent sex became the nymphomaniac. These identity categories were created to pathologise the whole being, leading to increased discrimination (Krafft-Ebing, 2006). The

pathologisation of the 'other' worked to establish heterosexuality as the 'norm', due to the contrast constructed in the discourse. Thus, heterosexual sex acts (all sex acts) have existed for as long as there have been people, however, heterosexuality as an identity label is a relatively new invention (heterosexual people have always existed but were not classified in this way), as is its binary relationship to homosexuality and the beliefs regarding how a heterosexual person should look, act, think and feel (Ambrosino, 2017).

Heteronormativity as an institution is reinforced through the binary separation of hetero/homosexual, which is in turn reinforced through the "terror of being mistaken for queer" (p.27), which Thomas (2000) argues "dominates the straight mind because this terror *constitutes* the straight mind" (p.27). Moreover, to understand oneself as straight, part of that identity is a terrified rejection of the alternative. Queer is continuously reiterated as a horror, from which heterosexuals must distance themselves, which reinforces a binary separation between straight and queer, and maintains straightness as the norm (heteronormativity) (Thomas, 2000: 28). Heteronormativity needs to prove itself to be reinforced. Heterosexuality is only proven via constant self-demonstration; an individual must say how straight they are, act in ways expected of straight people, and distance themselves from behaviours associated with queerness (Thomas, 2000: 28). Although heterosexuality relies on its opposition to queerness to "situate itself as normative", it must also "suppress knowledge of this dependence on queerness", as the admission of reliance on the queer would undermine heterosexuality as a 'norm' (Alexander, 2005:388).

Heteronormativity can be queered, questioned and dismantled. Queer is a positionality and a perspective (Thomas, 2000: 12). Queering is a process through which norms are questioned and difference is celebrated, thus, heterosexuals can use the idea of queerness to interrogate the norms of heterosexuality (Thomas, 2000: 12). Thus, a heterosexual person can be queer, can have queerness and can queer things (Thomas, 2000: 12). Alexander (2005) created an online fan site “Straightboyz4Nsync”, to prompt their students to think about the norms and expectations of heterosexuality, particularly male heterosexuality. It is not considered usual for heterosexual men to confess their love for boybands, so Alexander (2005) hoped to prompt discussions about the “story of straightness” and what that story might reveal about “the politics and rhetoric of heterosexuality in our culture” (p.379). Alexander (2005) noted that heterosexuality has privilege in its ability to escape questioning. As a norm, heterosexuality is assumed in individuals until informed otherwise; heterosexual people do not ‘come out’ as their heterosexuality is automatically assumed (Alexander, 2005:376). Thomas (2000) concurs: “Straights have the political luxury of not having to think about their sexuality, in much the same way as men have not had to think of themselves as being gendered and whites have not had to think of themselves as raced” (p.17).

Furthermore, Dean (2014) theorised about “queered heterosexualities”, a more fluid understanding of what it means to be heterosexual in contrast to “static” and “clearly defined” (p.182) sexual identity categories. Dean (2014) explores terms such as “metrosexual” and “heteroflexible” (p.182), as examples of when individuals have taken on a queerer understanding of what it means to be straight. Dean (2014) theorises that some practices such as cohabiting without marriage may be non-

normative, but for a practice to be queer, it needs to contain some fluidity of sexual desire or gender presentation. Thus, heterosexual practices such as non-monogamy, group sex, cross-dressing, kinks and fetishes, may be considered aspects of queer heterosexuality. Although heterosexuality/heterosexual relationships are considered the 'norm', they are socially constructed identities and impacted by expectations and pressures. Therefore, the demographic for this study, men who have sex with women, may be impacted by these expectations and their sexual behaviours and communications affected.

On the topic of 'normative' sexuality, sexual citizenship theories consider who is given the right to citizenship in a society, based on their sexuality, and how certain forms of sexuality are encouraged or discouraged. Thus, those who are respected as citizens will have a sense of belonging, social inclusion, and civil and economic rights (Weeks, 2023: 136). Sexual citizenship has been used to think about access to rights, and how these are given or denied according to an individual's intimate life and are transparently controlled through laws and systems (Richardson, 2017: 211). According to Richardson's (2017:2011) systematic review, most sexual citizenship work had focused on LGBTQ+ lives and rights. However, laws relating to sexual assault and rape and how those laws are enforced, also impact citizenship. The law seems to encourage consensual sexual behaviour, and those found to be assaulting others are, in theory, denied sexual citizenship when convicted. However, who is convicted/ not convicted when accused, and who is believed/ not believed when reporting, can reveal who is valued as a sexual citizen.

Citizenship is also “historically grounded in normative assumptions about sexuality”, with rights given to those who follow heteronormative practises (Richardson, 2017: 212). For example, marriage and parenthood are considered key pillars of Western society, and citizenship, rights and a sense of belonging are given to those who participate in these regimes (Richardson, 2017: 212). Historically, key discourses about normative sexual practice have guided who is granted sexual citizenship. Evans (1993) highlights a few examples: “the hysterisation of women’s bodies”, worries about women being too sexual or not reproductive enough, “the pedagogisation of children’s sexuality”, children are seen as innocent and needing to be protected from sexual knowledge, “the socialisation of procreative behaviour”, the family unit is prioritised economically and socially, and “the psychiatrisation of perverse pleasure” (p.17), pleasure outside of a reproductive ideal is pathologised. Those who follow these norms are granted sexual citizenship and rights, those who do not, are excluded because they do not fit what is considered to be a normal and healthy human life.

Citizenship is also linked to the right to participate in a consumer society and consume goods and services (Richardson, 2017:211). Individuals can be considered sexual citizens when products relating to their intimate lives, sex and romantic relationships are available and accessible. Sexual citizenship has alternatively been used to refer to an “acknowledgement of one’s own right to sexual self-determination”, rather than “to call attention to the state’s designation of people as citizens or noncitizens” depending on their sexuality (Hirsch & Khan, 2020: 7). Sexual citizenship, by this definition, is a “socially produced” feeling of a right to make one’s own sexual choices and to have agency to participate in a sexual world (Hirsch & Khan, 2020: 7).

Within this model of sexual citizenship, Hirsch and Khan (2020: 5) explore the notion of “sexual projects”. A sexual project is the reason why an individual is seeking a sexual experience and the type of sexual experience they are seeking. This may be for pleasure, to have a relationship, to have children, for comfort, status, to try a specific new thing, and often an individual will have a few current sexual projects (Hirsch & Khan, 2020: 5). Students at university often want to learn to be ‘good’ at sex, to gain experience, for either self-understanding and identity development or to improve their status (Hirsch & Khan, 2020: 5). With regards to status, students will often want to have enough sexual partners to “convey expertise”, but few enough to “dodge being labelled a “fuckboy” or “whore” (Hirsch & Khan, 2020: 5). The study also engaged with consent projects and found that the students’ consent practices did not align with the affirmative model despite thinking of this behaviour as ideal, and the participants were concerned about this, so their project was not carried out (Hirsch & Khan, 2020). A sexual project may guide the types of experiences individuals want to consent to, and the solo or masturbatory experiences they want to have, and thus guide experiences with consent. The gendered pressures or assumptions placed on young men interested in women may lead this group to develop particular sexual projects, to try to meet expectations associated with ideal masculinity. Therefore, considering this sexual theory may help to understand and explain why individuals take part in certain sexual behaviours such as their consent practice. However, projects are not always followed or fulfilled.

2.5.2 Masculinities, Gender Roles and Sexuality:

The present study follows an understanding of gender as social, a role and a performance, as defined by Butler (1999: 178). The construction, however, of gender and normalised gender roles is often concealed prompting individuals to view them as natural and necessary (Butler, 1999:178). Connell (2005:4) expands that historically gender has been defined and explored via two prominent forms of knowledge. Firstly, through “common sense”, the commonly accepted belief that men and women are just essentially different in their actions and thoughts, and secondly through “psychological science” (Connell, 2005:4). However, appeals to science are mostly made to reinforce and legitimise the assumptions made through “common sense” (Connell, 2005:4). An individual constructs their gender through a “stylized repetition of acts” referring to “the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler, 1999:179). Thus, through small repeated acts, gender is performed to the “social audience” and the self, and is believed by both (Butler, 1999:179). Gendered behaviours are learnt from early childhood through “names, etiquette, dress, choice of friends, sexual attraction, play, competition, eating and self-concept” (Lavin, 2013: 7). Furthermore, wider social practice is ordered by gender and the processes of gender performance (Connell, 2005:71). Specifically, gender roles give order to the “reproductive arena”, which includes “sexual arousal and intercourse, childbirth and infant care, bodily sex difference and similarity”, thus there is an ongoing interplay between normative, binary gender roles and heteronormativity (Connell, 2005:71).

Connell (2005:73) argues that gender is structured, defined, and differentiated according to three pillars: power (patriarchy and control), production (the organisation

of the economy and how labour is divided) and cathexis (emotional attachment and sexual desire). Therefore, there are established norms about the roles of masculinity and femininity in relation to these three areas. Masculinity as a concept is defined by individual and relational aspects.

Individual behaviours are deemed to be signifiers of masculinity, such as behaviour in conflict, sports ability and interest in sex (Connell, 2005:67). However, masculinity can also only exist in binary opposition to femininity; that which is considered unmanly is feminine and that which is considered unwomanly is masculine (Connell, 2005:67). Masculinity relies on femininity for its construction, although, masculinity and femininity can be present in all genders (Connell, 2005:67).

“Hegemonic masculinity” refers to the “currently most honoured way of being a man”, the ideal conceptualisation of masculine gender performance in any given specific time or place (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 832). It is an ideal which is often unobtainable and requires men to position themselves in relation to it, to judge their closeness to the ideal (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 832). This can place a huge pressure on men to fulfil an unobtainable ideal, or alternatively, as the hegemonic masculinity legitimises the superiority of men and patriarchy, men may want to distance themselves from it if this conflicts with their worldview (Connell, 2005:77). Men whose gender expression is not hegemonic, but who still receive the benefits of patriarchy, have been thought to show a “complicit masculinity” (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 832). However, this term seems to place undue blame on these men for benefitting from a system they did not choose and do not ultimately control. Hegemonic masculinities are also specific to time and location, and over time,

previously hegemonic masculinities “might be displaced by new ones”, so it is “possible that a more humane, less oppressive, means of being a man might become hegemonic, as part of a process leading toward an abolition of gender hierarchies” (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 832).

Current hegemonic masculinity promotes a “hyperheterosexual” identity, comprised of compulsory heterosexuality and an elevated interest in sex and masturbation (Kehily, 2002: 35). Normative gender roles lead to the celebration of “being a lad” amongst young men, when they fulfil this identity (Kehily, 2002: 35). Furthermore, in sex education contexts, the pressures to perform hyperheterosexuality and prove a masculinity close to the hegemonic ideal, can lead young men to act out and become disruptive to show off their sexual knowledge (Davidson, 1997: 89). The pressures of normative masculine gender roles also generate pressures during sexual activity, and young men feel pressure to perform these ideals, particularly in heterosexual contexts (Harle, 2022:56). For their body to physically perform (to have and maintain an erection), to perform desirable behaviour (to pleasure their partner), and pressure to initiate and lead the sexual experience (Harle, 2022:56). As a symbol of masculinity, there are many ideals associated with the penis (size, shape, strength of erection, time to ejaculate), ideals which a man has little control over, so the penis may rarely live up to expectation, provoking shame (Stepien, 2016: 22). Thus, sex can become rife with anxiety and worry due to unobtainable gendered expectations.

The theory of habitus could be used to understand how young men learn to perform masculinity and how gendered expectations might guide their (hetero)sexual experiences, including consent communication. “Habitus” as theorised by Bourdieu,

explores the interplay between individual agency and social structure, to explain why individuals follow and fulfil certain “regularities” of their class or place in society (Grenfell, 2014: 49). Individuals learn from experience how people in their social position think, feel and behave, and these shape their dispositions to think, feel and behave in certain ways, presently and in the future. Bourdieu summarised the idea of habitus as how a person develops a “feel for the game”; from their specific experiences, they learn how to play the game of life (Grenfell, 2014: 53). An individual’s habitus is “systematically ordered”, shaped by circumstances, past and present, such as “family upbringing” and “educational experiences”, and structures “present and future practises” (Grenfell, 2014: 50). In summary, “this “structure” comprises a system of dispositions which generate perceptions, appreciations and practices” (Grenfell, 2014: 50). Decision making is also guided by habitus, as individuals will have a disposition to make certain choices over others, depending on their life experiences (Grenfell, 2014: 51). The demographic: young men who have sex with women, experience a specific habitus, due to the unique experiences and worldviews associated with their intersectional identity. Therefore, habitus can be used to explain why young men might (re)produce the norms associated with their demographic during sexual experiences and consent communication.

Habitus guides thoughts, feelings and behaviours with regards to work life, social life, sex and relationships. Green (2008) suggests that habitus can be utilised to explain how desires are formulated. Green (2008: 614) terms the habitus specific to desire, the “erotic habitus”. According to an individual’s life circumstances and experiences, they will unconsciously give erotic meaning to particular objects (Green, 2008: 614). Thus, the social becomes embedded in the individual and the “erotic habitus generates

sexual fantasies that are subjective but not individual erotic representations”, as they are guided by wider social norms shared by their group, class or community (Green, 2008: 614). Habitus, and erotic habitus, provide dispositions but not a person’s fate; from the unconscious dispositions of the erotic habitus, individuals will “consciously improvise a sexual script” (Green, 2008: 616). If sexual behaviours are consciously created, it implies that individuals may be influenced by external expectations but do have agency, and potentially their behaviours are malleable, undermining the metaphor of the script.

Erotic habitus has been argued to form sexual dispositions, including those towards sexual communication and consent strategy. O’Toole (2021:82) terms sexual behaviours, as opposed to sexual desires (erotic habitus), which are developed from habitus, as the “sexual habitus”. The sexual habitus can lead to the construction and reconstruction of sexual behaviours which produce and reproduce norms for a particular group (O’Toole, 2021:82). Within the heterosexual field, the sexual habitus is particularly gendered, with differing norms and expectations for men and women during sex (O’Toole, 2021:84). Thus, in the heterosexual context, gendered forms of sexual communication are formed from previous experiences and reconstruct the norms of the social group, impacting the exchange of consent (O’Toole, 2021:86). The implicit dispositions within the gendered sexual habitus can cause continued issues with regards to consent such as miscommunication, norms of consent exchange and victim-blaming attitudes (O’Toole, 2021:87). Although this theory might help to understand the pressures placed on young men and how they are reproduced, it is a prescriptive theory and potentially does not consider the agency of individuals. Norms

and expectations may influence a young man's understanding and practice of consent, so these theories can be used to unpack their consent experiences.

2.5.3 Gender and Sexual Shame:

Sexual expectations such as those placed on young men who have sex with women, can produce sexual shame when those expectations cannot be met or conflict with an individual's values. In the complex topic of sexual consent, there may be a discordance between expectations and values, leading to shame, which then influences the communication of consent.

Shame can influence sexual behaviours as individuals, due to their circumstances, feel shame towards certain sexual feelings, desires and behaviours. Men who are interested in women will feel unique shame, due to the intersectional expectations of their gender and sexuality. This thesis follows the constructionist model of shame, which understands emotions as part of a relational world (Gibson, 2019: 27). In an individual's lifetime, they will learn "culturally specific ways of perceiving, understanding and communicating about their interactions; emotions are one element of this learning process" (Gibson, 2019: 27). Shame is felt and developed according to a person's self-concept, which is developed from their context, thus, they will feel ashamed about different things depending on who they are and their previous life experiences (Gibson, 2019: 30). "Self-concept" is used to refer to how individuals understand themselves, want to behave socially and want to be perceived socially; the expectations they have for themselves (Gibson, 2019: 33). Shame is a distinct emotion from embarrassment. Shame is when a person feels bad about themselves for failing to live up to a standard they have established for themselves (Gibson, 2019: 35-36).

Embarrassment has an interpersonal element, an individual feels like their behaviour is not up to standard and other people are able to perceive this (Gibson, 2019: 35-36).

Due to masculine gender norms and pressures, men feel shame distinctly and paradoxically. Stepien (2016:7) argues that men may feel ashamed more readily because they have many pressures and standards to live up to, which are easy to fall short of, however, showing or even feeling shame can undermine male identity, leading to deeper shame. However, women and non-binary people also feel sexual shame due to the norms and pressures associated with their gender, and scrutiny of their sexual behaviours. Therefore, it does not feel accurate to argue that men feel more shame but rather their experiences of shame are unique and different to those of different genders because their sexual shame is highly specific to a specific set of cultural expectations relating to men and male sexuality.

As masculinity is established as the binary opposite of femininity, masculine and feminine shame are often opposites. What is celebrated in men, may bring shame to women because in acting masculinely, they are not acting femininely, fulfilling their gender role, and vice versa (Stepien, 2016: 12). For example, “men’s sexual conquests secure their image as powerful and dominating”, but the same behaviour in women might bring shame (Stepien, 2016: 12). Stepien (2016) highlights an image of *The expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden (1425) by Masaccio*, as an exemplar expression of masculine and feminine shame; while Eve covers her genitals and breasts in shame, concealing her sexuality, but shows sadness in her face, Adam’s body is uncovered, but he hides his face, his feelings (Stepien, 2016: 13).

Shame invites self-assessment, in men, it invites self-assessment about how to better perform an ideal form of masculinity (Stepien, 2016: 25). Thus, this self-assessment could guide how they practise consent with their partners.

Shame is also associated with sexuality. From the psychotherapy perspective, sexual shame can develop from childhood and early experiences. Young children crave sensual touch, such as the touch of their mother's skin, yet, with age, this is increasingly perceived as sexual touch which is "culturally unacceptable" (Shadbolt, 2009: 164). Thus, the child's touch is rejected prompting the development of shame about bodies and touch (Shadbolt, 2009: 164). The introduction of the concept of boundaries may produce shame but may also prompt learning about consent. The teenage years are also rife with shame, as the child's body develops through puberty and becomes sexualised, they will be encouraged to cover up and may compare themselves to their siblings and peers, prompting further shame (Shadbolt, 2009: 165). Furthermore, when the expected 'norms' of sexual behaviour associated with someone's gender, sexual identity or other part of their personhood, conflict with their inner feelings and preferences, they may feel shame (Shadbolt, 2009: 167). For example, Schooler et al (2005) reflect on the unique shame felt by women in relation to their bodies and sex. They note that menstruation is often seen as dirty or secretive which can lead women to feel ashamed of their bodies, genitals and by extension sexuality (Schooler et al, 2005: 324). Their study found that women who felt more shame about menstruation felt more shame about their bodies overall, and thus, felt more shame towards sex (Schooler et al, 2005: 331). This shame had a detrimental impact because the women who felt more shame engaged in sex less frequently, but when they did they had less sexual assertiveness, so they were less able to

communicate their needs and boundaries and took more sexual risks (Schooler et al, 2005: 331).

Men may experience sexual shame due to the pressures of fulfilling the masculine gender role. Gordon (2018) notes that men often receive confusing mixed messages about male sexuality, making them feel unsure about their behaviours and ashamed. Traditionally the masculine ideal encouraged men to be hypersexual and heterosexual, to enjoy casual sex and to show sexual prowess or skill (Gordon, 2018: 105). However, “modern social and cultural shifts in the dynamics of sexuality and gender have begun to compel men to be more restrained in their sexual expression”; public discourses may give the impression that male sexuality is toxic or unwanted, which can lead to shame surrounding sexual desire, porn consumption and masturbation (Gordon, 2018: 106). They created a scale to measure men’s sexual shame including: “Sexual Inexperience Distress (SID), Masturbation/Pornography Remorse (MPR), Libido Distain (LD), Body Dissatisfaction (BD), DSA, and Sexual Performance Insecurity (SPI)” (Gordon, 2018: 118). The first iteration of the scale included the category: “Sexual Harassment Stereotype Threat (SHST)” which was removed from the final scale because it was deemed to be “not indicative of shame” (Gordon, 2018: 118). However, this is a current issue and may cause feelings of shame in men. In recent years public discourses such as *#MeToo* and *Everyone’s Invited*, have rightly showcased the issue of widespread sexual harassment, abuse and violence towards women. As a result, men might be encouraged to think about the importance of consent, but they may also feel fear, worry or shame about how they are conducting their sexual relationships because of these movements and discourses about dangerous male sexuality. Men may feel pulled in polar directions, caught

between patriarchal or traditional, and modern or feminist ideals, of masculinity and masculine sexual practice, leading them to carefully balance their behaviour “between that considered too emotional and sissy, and on the other hand, not wanting to be a violent brute or a sexist” (Stepien, 2016: 18). Thus, they may feel pressure to live up to a standard whilst also being unsure of what that standard is, leading to greater potential for shame.

2.6 Literature Summary

In summary, the affirmative consent model (‘Yes means Yes’) is currently considered the best practice regarding consent communication in all contexts and is taught in sex education lessons, assault prevention campaigns, and legal definitions (Setty, 2021). The model ensures that consent is clear and respected. However, affirmative consent can be overly simple, legalistic and transactional, and suggests that consent should be communicated in the same manner in all contexts. This theoretical ideal largely ignores the complicated social context in which real sexual behaviours and relationships are situated.

Although most people might define ideal consent communication in abstract terms as following the affirmative model, this often conflicts with social norms which guide how consent should be carried out during sex (Graf and Johnson, 2021; Muehlenhard et al, 2016; Simon & Gagnon, 2002). Therefore, most people do not practise affirmative consent during their real sexual experiences instead utilising a more complex range of verbal and non-verbal cues which are mediated by the specific context. Consent communication in heterosexual dynamics can be impacted by factors such as

perceived desire or arousal, gender norms, relationship status, and the type of sexual behaviour (Willis, 2020).

If consent practice varies according to context then it can be influenced by contextual factors. Many studies have considered pornography to be particularly influential. Most research has considered the degree to which contemporary pornography teaches harmful sexual values and behaviours. However, this field is undermined by methodological shortcomings highlighted as the “negative effects paradigm” (McCormack and Wignall, 2017:976). It has less frequently been argued that pornography can be a useful source of sex information, providing explicit demonstrations of sexual bodies, acts and communication to aid reflection and evaluation. Thus, pornography has been integrated into the methodology of the present study to aid reflection and discussion of sexual communication and consent.

Furthermore, an individual’s experiences and the expectations or norms associated with those in their social group can influence their sexual feelings and behaviours. Thus, these circumstances will impact a person’s feelings about consent and their consent practice. Men who have sex with women face unique expectations and norms due to the assumptions made about their gender and sexuality, which influence their sexual behaviours, and by extension, their sexual communication and consent practice. These norms can also produce feelings of worry and shame about sex when there are conflicts between different values or expectations regarding consent practice.

Overall, the present study aims to explore how young men who have sex with women conceptualise consent, practise consent, and what may influence their feelings and behaviours around consent. This literature chapter has shown that in the field consent as an ideal concept is often theoretical, simplistic and assumes that consent should be practised in the same way, in all circumstances, by all people. In contrast, the field has shown that consent practice is fluid and variable. Consent communication in the real-world varies according to context such as the individual's self-concept, relationships and the sexual experiences they are having. Therefore, if consent is fluid, it is also changeable and malleable; it can be influenced. Consent functions differently in different contexts because the contexts themselves influence the practice of consent. External social objects, particularly pornography, have been argued to influence consent. Furthermore, the demographic young men who have sex with women experience a unique context, pressures and norms which thus influences their consent practice. Therefore, the present study addresses a need to conduct research about consent which foregrounds experience, real-world context and the nuanced and changeable nature of consent. This study considers how young men who have sex with women communicate consent, the technicalities of how that communication functions, as well as their feelings and values about consent when they want to engage in positive real-world sexual experiences

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Methodology Introduction

The following chapter explains the methodology for the present interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study. IPA was selected as the methodological approach because it centres experience and real-world feelings and behaviours. Firstly, the chapter sets out the research questions and sub-questions that the methods sought to answer. I then explain the research philosophy underpinning this thesis. The research uses an interpretivist ontology, and the epistemology follows a phenomenological approach. I shall then explain the research design. Data were collected via a qualitative, mixed-methods process involving two rounds of interviews and diary entries. During this process, participants were encouraged to explain their experiences of consent and to evaluate consent more deeply utilising pornography which showcased consent, to aid the process of reflection. The data were then analysed using in-depth IPA techniques. The chapter then describes the study participants and the processes of sampling and recruitment. The chapter closes with ethical considerations of the research and reflexivity.

3.2 The Research Questions

The methodology outlined in this chapter was used to explore how young men understand and practise sexual consent with women, and the degree to which this is created, maintained and influenced through a process of reflection supported by pornography which showcases consent. Through the study environment and processes, the participants were offered a dedicated space where reflection about

consent is enabled and encouraged. The interviews and time given to completing reflective diary entries created an allotted mental space to think about consent directly, which may not otherwise occur in the participants' daily lives.

The research sought to understand the following research question:

How is sexual consent conceptualised, practised and influenced by young men who have sex with women?

Within this overarching question, there were two sub-questions:

- 1. How do young men who have sex with women conceptualise and practice sexual consent?**
- 2. Can engaging with pornography which showcases consent, alongside dedicated space and prompts, allow them to reflect, and influence their prior conceptualisations and practices of sexual consent?**

3.3 An IPA Study of Consent

This project is an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). IPA was selected to foreground the experience of the participants and to encourage an in depth understanding of their feelings and behaviours during real-world sexual encounters. IPA research has been used widely for topics “concerned with sex and sexuality”, due to the sensitive nature of the topic and the importance of individual, personal experience (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009: 135&143). IPA can also challenge methodologies or approaches which may

other or pathologise people or behaviours (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009:143). The IPA process used inductive methods to allow the data to lead to findings, with ideas developed directly from the participants' words and experiences, without any preconceived ideas from the researcher.

"The IPA researcher is engaged in a double hermeneutic" which involves interpreting the participants' interpretations of their experience, with reflexivity at the core of the process (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009: 3). As the researcher, I invited the participants to reflect on their experience, share those experiences with me and then I reflected on their data. Furthermore, the social construction of knowledge is embedded within the double hermeneutic process of IPA analysis, because the research interprets the participant's interpretation of their experience (Fagan, 2010: 95). During the data collection and analysis process, I engaged in a process of reflection whereby I would consider the previous interviews or diary entries when collecting the next. I was consistently exploring and (re)evaluating reoccurring themes and experiences as more data was collected. At each stage, I considered the impact my personal values and circumstances might have on how data was collected and how I was analysing it reflecting on the data with reflexivity. For example, frequently participants told me that they felt more comfortable sharing with a woman than a male researcher because they felt that a woman would be more understanding and shared their additional experiences of sexual anxiety outside of the scope of the research. As I collected more data and this idea was shared more frequently, I became more mindful of the impact of this increased sharing on the data that was collected.

IPA studies are also ideographic; they are “committed to the detailed examination of the particular case”, to understand a small number of individuals’ specific, subjective experiences (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009: 3). The research process focussed on how the participants uniquely understood and practised consent; the nature of their specific experiences regarding consent (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009: 3). The IPA process understands that experiences are unique to everyone’s viewpoints, understandings and “embodied and situated relationship to the world” (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009: 21). Therefore, this study explores how each participant’s individual contexts and histories link to their present, embodied, experiences of consent. The IPA process understands that experiences are subjective, and thus, the participants’ understanding and practice of consent are understood as subjective and unique to them as individuals (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009: 33). The participants are only able to describe their own feelings in a sexual scenario or the consent exchange, and their interpretation of their partners’ behaviours or manners. IPA studies consider the process of meaning-making, and this study explores how the participants conceptualise consent and how they came to that meaning as well as their experiences of communicating consent (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009: 45). When dealing with topics such as sexual behaviour and consent, where there is a risk of othering or pathologising. IPA methodology centres subjective experience and individual humanity and thus keeps the person at the heart of the exploration.

3.4 Research Philosophy

The thesis is an interpretivist research project which utilises a phenomenological approach and a qualitative research design as is typical for IPA research. The study

aims to understand how the participants individually and subjectively understand, experience and communicate sexual consent; and the unique role it plays in their lives.

3.4.1 Interpretivism:

Interpretivist research philosophies in the social sciences argue against objective truths because the social world is inherently subjective and is perceived, understood and perpetuated through human bodies and minds. Interpretivist studies accept the subjectivity of the human world and make that subjectivity the focus of their enquiry. They may investigate individuals' subjective perspectives of an object, the meaning of behaviours and the nature of experiences. Ontologically, the research considers "the nature of social entities" to be a construction, rather than a concrete structure (Bryman, 2016: 28). Thus, the research assumes that experiences of reality are variable and highly dependent on context and individual outlook. They explore why certain phenomena are considered differently by different individuals, scrutinise context, and analyse meaning-making processes (Haverland and Yanow, 2012: 404). As well as exploring the subjective social world, interpretivist researchers are reflexive and reflect on their own subjective perspectives as part of the social world and how this may impact the research. Interpretivist social science research also engages with values, which Douglas (2011:521-523) argues is unavoidable for all social science research as value judgements are involved in the whole research process, from selecting a topic to defining the social objects being studied. The project seeks to determine how consent is understood and incorporated into sexual behaviours by the participants and is therefore concerned with individual values and how these guide experiences and seeks to uncover subjective notions of what constitutes sexual consent. It then seeks to follow the participants' individual engagement with porn with explicit consent, the

process of reflection, and any potential impacts on how they define and practise sexual consent. Thus, an interpretivist research philosophy was preferred, so that each participant's subjective thoughts and feelings relating to their experience of consent could be explored.

Interpretivist designs will engage with the chaos of the world as it is and can engage closely with individual contexts. Thus, findings are specific to the context and nuance of the situation studied and cannot be generalised to a wider population. However, the insights gained from interpretivist research can contribute to the development of broader theoretical frameworks which can be relevant to similar populations or different populations experiencing the same phenomenon or context. Therefore, this research could lead to the development of a broad understanding of consent, via the detailed exploration of varied consent experiences, which could be applied to other populations and their understanding of consent in future research.

3.4.2 Phenomenology:

A phenomenological approach was selected to foreground the experiences of the participants and how those experiences have shaped their understanding of what constitutes consent and how it should be practised. Phenomenology is at the heart of IPA research. Phenomenology is an epistemological position because it considers experience as key to knowledge-building; the production of knowledge (Berghofer, 2019: 120). Husserl argued that the realisation of knowledge is an inherently subjective act in many different fields (Berghofer, 2019: 121). Berghofer (2019:121) gave an example: in the natural sciences, knowledge is gathered via a process of

observation (experiments, outcomes and data are observed), thus, because observation is a subjective experience, experience is at the centre of the knowledge-building process.

This study considers the knowledge-building processes of the researcher to be experiential in nature and additionally, uses the subjective experiences of the participants as the central sources of information. I consider how the participants create meaning and values regarding sexual consent, the factors impacting this, as well as the level of congruence between their concept of consent and their practice. The participants' experiences will be subjective as they are specific to their point of view and embodiment (Matthews, 2006: 20). Moreover, phenomenology involves thinking about the "direct human experience" (Matthews, 2006: 14-16).

The study analyses the wider, shared social context of the participants as well as their specific experiences, to explore how these shape understandings of consent and the malleability of these understandings. I can also explore how this social phenomenon (consent), and the meanings applied to it, might be "produced through social interaction" (Bryman, 2016: 28). When objects are created socially, through learned concepts and shared values, social interaction continually feeds and shapes the definition of the object, so it is in a "constant state of revision" (Bryman, 2016: 28). Thus, the participants' experiences of consent as a concept and a practice may shift over their lifetime, when they are in different contexts, or over the course of their involvement in the study, and this will be explored.

3.5 Research Design

Qualitative research methods in social science involve the collection and analysis of data according to its qualities within its real-world context. It is “concerned with the systematic investigation of people’s experiences, attitudes, motives, beliefs, and behaviours concerning a phenomenon of interest”, in this case, sexual consent (Ivey, 2023: 21). The data collected, according to these methods, are mostly textual and all non-numerical, such as interview transcripts, survey data and fieldnotes (Saldana, 2011: 3). Data is collected interactively with participants and the researcher must be reflexive and aware of their potential bias or influence. Furthermore, qualitative researchers can explore “hidden meanings” in the data, produced when participants “inadvertently convey meaning that exceeds their consciously expressive intentions and self-understandings” (Ivey, 2023: 22). In addition, as engagement with pornography is a personal experience, Weinberg et al (2010: 1392) argue that “any study of the effects of pornography should include a strong qualitative aspect in which the research participants themselves provide their own interpretations of the experience”.

For the present IPA study, data were collected via three stages which took two months for each participant to complete. Each participant undertook the same process which consisted of an initial interview, six weeks of diary entries and a follow-up interview. Data were collected between February and July 2023. This involved a mixed methods design, using multiple complementary methods to collect data and allow findings to be elaborated or linked (Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill, 2019: 175). Data from each participant’s two interviews and their diary entries were explored to create a detailed picture of their understanding and experience of sexual consent, and the potential

development of their understanding as they interact with the sample materials of pornography with explicit consent. Diaries and interviews were used in tandem because this helped to form a more detailed picture of their sexual consent behaviours over the study period (what they did) and how they subjectively experienced, interpreted and narrativised them. Pornography which shows explicit consent was explored as a tool to aid reflection and understanding about consent and embedded into the research design. This novel use of pornography was developed from previous research regarding what people learn from porn, educational pornography and how porn can help individuals to think about holistically safe sex through directly engaging with a sexually explicit demonstration. This body of research was explored in the previous literature review chapter. The research design took participants on a journey of exploration, to consider how they previously experienced consent, their reflections on consent during the study process and the potential impact of this process on their future experiences of consent.

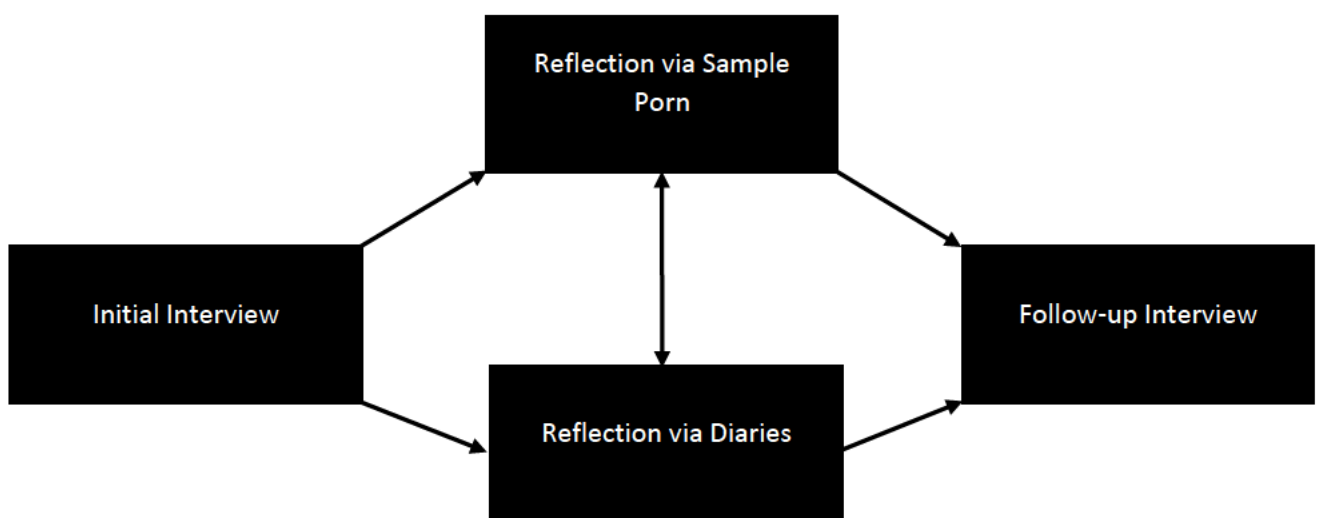


Figure 2: A summary of the data collection stages

3.6 Participant Selection

3.6.1 Sampling:

The participants all self-identified as within the group: men who have sex with women, aged 18-25, who were students at a selected UK university. They did not need to be born in the UK, but needed to be living there to study, and international students were included. Students were selected due to feasibility; I would have access to recruit these people through their university and in the case of any wellbeing concerns during the research process, I could refer them to their university support services. Participants needed to be willing to talk openly about their sex life and open to the idea of watching the sample pornographic videos, potentially excluding those who find it difficult to talk about sex or who do not watch porn. Participants also needed to confirm that they were aged 18 or over to participate and needed to consent to each stage of the research.

This study involved purposive homogeneous sampling as is typical for IPA studies because the research considers the experiences of a specific group of people (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009: 49). This was non-probability sampling so the sample was not calculated to reflect features of the real population proportionally. Self-selection sampling was utilised, whereby the research was advertised to potential participants within the required demographic and then they could select to take part.

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) suggest that “between three and six” participants are suitable for an IPA study, whilst between “four and ten” (p.51) interviews are recommended for an IPA study at PhD level. IPA samples are often small to allow a

deep, textual analysis of each participant's data, to understand, line by line the content of each participant's data and how they are conveying their ideas (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014: 9). I consulted recent research regarding sexuality and consent which utilised IPA, to better understand the usual data sufficiency for this type of research. The studies involved between ten and two participants (O'Connor, 2017; O'Mullan et al, 2019; Dewinter, et al. 2017; Cascalheira, Thomson, & Wignall, 2022; Widanaralalage, et al. 2022; Kloess et al, 2019). There was a large variation in the volume of data deemed sufficient for each study, depending on the aims and objectives of the research. This informed my sampling and recruitment because I knew what sort of figure I was aiming for; however, I did not stop recruiting until I reached data saturation. For this study, 11 participants (seven who completed the six-week process, four who completed one interview only), were deemed appropriate to develop significant themes in line with other research in the field. This is because at this stage, ideas were being frequently repeated and new data reflected already considered ideas, so I decided that I had reached an acceptable level of data saturation and stopped recruitment to focus on final analysis and write up. Furthermore, the final number of participants was small enough to allow a deep textual analysis of the content, language and tone in their data, whilst also being large enough to allow for some diversity to explore a wider range of perspectives and lived experiences. Details of the final group of participants included in the study and their contexts, are outlined in the following chapter.

3.6.2 Recruitment:

Recruitment for this study began in February 2023. I used an engaging and colourful recruitment poster which briefly explained the nature of the research and the desired

demographics (See Appendix 3). I put up copies of the poster in the male toilets in the University Library, Student Union and other large buildings, allowing potential participants to view and take note of the details in private if they wished as the research concerns a sensitive topic, but I also put posters in common areas and study rooms. I regularly visited different social spaces on the university campus with a small printout of the poster asking to briefly talk to people about my research and giving them a flyer. Alongside the physical advertising, I advertised the research on social media with a description of the research and an electronic version of the poster attached. This was shared on Facebook pages, Twitter, Instagram, and Reddit groups affiliated with the chosen UK university (See Appendix 3). I also reached out to potential participants through direct messages on social media. I composed a short letter explaining the research and then messaged this to men who had posted in the university student Facebook groups (See Appendix 3). The research poster invited potential participants to contact me via email. I would then respond with the full participant information sheet to ensure that participants were fully aware of what the research was about, what taking part would involve, and the consent form for the first stage of the research (see Appendix 4). If they were happy to take part, they could return the completed consent form and we could proceed.

There were some potential barriers to successful recruitment and retaining recruited participants. Firstly, when a study requires a large volume of a participant's time, this may be too high a cost for the participant and stop them from taking part (Saunders et al, 2019). To mitigate against this, I needed to make sure that my study was well advertised, and appeared interesting and engaging, and during the data collection process, I needed to check in on my participants at regularly spaced intervals, to

prompt them to continue and to highlight their value to the study. There may also be issues if the gatekeeper to the potential participants restricts access. During recruitment, I contacted university societies asking for permission to talk to their members at a meeting and asked the university sports centre for permission to advertise within the gym and to sports teams, but this was not given. Therefore, I needed to ensure that my other methods of recruitment were extensive.

3.7 Data Collection

3.7.1 Data Collection Stage 1: The Initial Interviews

The first step in the data collection process was an initial qualitative interview. These interviews were carried out to explore the participants' understanding and practice of consent up until their participation in the study, and how they have utilised sexual consent in past experiences.

Brinkmann (2013) identifies qualitative interviews as a key method for social science research. Interviews can be phenomenological and focus on experience, or language-focussed and focus on discourse. The interviews conducted for the present study belonged to the former group. As the conversation is a fundamental part of the human experience and how we understand each other, interviews, as a conversation between two people on a specific topic, can be an “indispensable source of knowledge about personal and social aspects of our lives” (Brinkmann, 2013: 3).

The purpose of the interview is to gather information about the interviewee's life and perspectives, therefore, my role as the interviewer was primarily to listen, giving full attention to what they are saying without giving my opinion or advice (Brinkmann, 2013: 8). Often an interviewee may express opinions which seem to conflict, or distract from finding the interviewees true voice, but Brinkmann (2013: 24) advises that internal conflicts and multiple internal voices can be key to an individual's experiences and so the interviewer should note and honour these conflicts. Furthermore, the interviewer needs to manufacture distance, think critically about what is being said and not assume shared meanings of familiar phrases or common experiences (McCracken, 1988: 22). The interviewees themselves should also be encouraged to think deeply about their beliefs and explore their assumptions (McCracken, 1988: 23).

The interviews were semi-structured and lasted up to one hour. As per guidance from the ethics committee, all interviews were conducted via the telephone. Telephone interviews were suggested to protect the wellbeing of the participants and researcher by providing more distance and privacy when discussing sensitive topics. Not being face to face may have allowed participants to speak more freely, giving more detail than they might have otherwise, however, it also meant that I could not consider body language. Regardless, the interview process produced quality, detailed data for transcription and analysis. I also reacted with curiosity and surprise during interviews to encourage the participants to think more deeply about their beliefs and assumptions and to describe these further (McCracken, 1988: 23).

Before conducting the interview, I greeted the participant, thanked them for their participation and engaged in some small talk. The opening questions asked for some demographic information as well as some less personal questions about sex, such as how often they have sex, if they have a partner or engage in casual sex and if they watch pornography. As the interviews were semi-structured, I used some key prompts to guide the conversation but mostly allowed the participants to lead the discussion. This was beneficial because the participants could talk about the topics which were most notable to them and thus, I could gain insight into their subjective priorities, perceptions and experiences. Thomas (2017) advises the researcher to create a list of important points to cover, these do not have to be addressed in order but provide a “reminder of what you intend to cover” (p.206). After the initial prompt to start a discussion, follow-up questions and probes were used to encourage the participant to continue and discuss the issue in full (Thomas, 2017: 207). The interviews were “conversations with a purpose”; the tone was casual to create an easy rapport with the participants and encourage them to share (Burgess, 1984: 102). Yet the prompts guided the conversation to stay on topic.

Although the interview was about consent, I decided not to use the word ‘consent’ in the interviews. Instead, I asked them about how they recognised and communicated willingness and unwillingness in themselves or their partners and more broadly about their sexual communication strategies. I asked them how they communicated their desire to have sex with their partner, how their partner communicated this with them, and how they understood their partner’s willingness to engage in different sexual activities. This is because, asking ‘did you ask for consent’, would likely invite a more superficial response, such as ‘yes I did, no I didn’t’, whereas my deeper questions

about their communication strategies, invited responses about the more nuanced ways they communicate consent, understand their partner's consent and recognise communications indicating non-consent.

Furthermore, the interview needs to be addressed with criticality because participants may engage in socially desirable reporting (saying what they think the interviewer wants to hear or amending narratives to what they think will be a more widely acceptable account of events). For example, many of the participants expressed that they preferred pornography which felt more realistic with less obviously cosmetically enhanced women or exaggerated or faked indicators of pleasure. As sexual fantasy often does not align with preferred partnered sexual acts, they may have been noting this based on their assumptions about what a female researcher would deem desirable or a feminist approach. However, when they stated their preferences, they framed them as what they found most pleasurable rather than what they thought was morally better, which made their assertions feel authentic. The findings presented in this thesis need to be taken with some scepticism as there may be more to the issue than what the participants shared with me as the researcher. However, their narratives in this particular research context did produce useful insights to be analysed for patterns about feelings and behaviours regarding consent. Further exploratory research is needed to explore these findings within different contexts to develop further understandings of sexual consent communication.

In addition, the thesis concerns consent communication by men who are aiming to have healthy consensual experiences. As the research explored consent from a

subjective and personal perspective, it cannot be known for certain that the participants were valuing consent, only that they reported they were. There is a possibility that participants were dishonest about their intentions, or they incorrectly believed themselves to have been prioritising consent. However, during the study, my impression was that the participants were earnestly trying their best to have consensual experiences and healthy relationships. Further research needs to engage with all parties engaging in a sexual relationship to explore if consent was perceived to be present from all perspectives involved.

3.7.2 Data Collection Stage 2: Engagement with the Sample Pornography:

After the initial interview, the participants were electronically sent a selection of sample pornographic videos demonstrating examples of consent communication and were asked to view at least one video at least once per week. Instructions were not prescriptive, to allow the participants to explore the sample videos as they liked, some viewing them alone, others with partners and some watching more different videos or videos more frequently than others. This gave the participants agency and allowed them to guide their own reflections and engage as they felt comfortable doing so.

IPA methodologies explore experiences; that is, real-world situated feelings and actions (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). However, as explored in the literature chapter, discussions about consent particularly what constitutes ideal consent practice can be highly theoretical and detached from the reality of sexual behaviour and communication during sexual experiences. The sample pornography used in the study was an explicit illustration of what consent might look like and could ground

discussions and thoughts within an explicit sexual context. It also gave the participants a resource to use to compare and contrast with their own sexual experiences, inviting a process of deeper reflection about how they conceptualise and practise consent. The pornographic clips acted as sexually explicit video vignettes which presented examples of sexual behaviour to aid reflection and discussion with the researcher. Vignettes are a useful tool in phenomenological research to help ground discussions in a specific context and help to participants explore and share their experiences (Agostini, Schratz, and Eloff, 2024). However, as sexually explicit, audio-visual examples, the sample videos were more detailed and invited a more involved experience of engagement than a traditional written vignette, aiming to encourage further reflection and deeper discussion. The participants in this study indeed reflected on the sample materials and made comparisons to their own sexual experiences, shared those reflections with me in the diaries and interviews and then I engaged in a reflective process during analysis. The sample materials allowed a deeper level of reflection which benefitted the double hermeneutic cycle undertaken in IPA studies (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009).

Furthermore, as explored in the literature, there are examples whereby porn has been used as an educational tool, individuals have sought porn for sexual learning or it has been created as a sex-educational tool (Philpott, Singh and Gamlin, 2017; Dawson et al, 2022; Litsou et al, 2021). Thus, there is a precedent of porn being used to aid reflection and influence ideas about sex. The literature chapter has also suggested that individuals may be inspired by porn or to think about pornographic sex, but do not copy it passively (McCormack and Wignall, 2017). Therefore, individuals might engage actively with pornography and use it as a tool for reflection without becoming passively

compelled to behave in the ways depicted by the materials. Pornography has also been embedded into the research design of other studies, either to interrogate the nature of pornography or to encourage study participants to reflect on their sexual values and behaviours. Thus, it was deemed appropriate to embed pornography into the methodology of the present study. It was offered to the participants as a tool to aid reflection and evaluation, to focus thoughts on explicit examples of communication during sexual activities and ground thinking about consent in the context of specific and explicit sexual experience.

Pornography has been used in the methodologies of previous studies about consent (Jackson, 2016; Cusack, 2013). However, this has mostly manifested in the field as concerns about the nature of pornography and whether it has a harmful influence on consent practice. Concerns include misogyny and violence in mainstream pornography and the impact this may have on the behaviour of consumers (Shor and Seida, 2019; Terán and Dajches, 2020; Peter and Valkenburg, 2016). Studies have considered how different pornographic films might show the characters onscreen expressing consent, or alternatively, how porn films might not adequately show consent practises. Willis et al (2020) conducted a content analysis of the presentation of consent in mainstream pornographic films, to understand how these films tend to model or show consent. Whilst most people would identify most pornography as showing consensual sex, and agree that most porn appears consensual, fewer people think that pornography is a good source of consent information (Willis et al, 2020: 52).

Cusack (2013) explored the presentation of consent to insemination in online pornography, which they describe as an “additional sex act” which therefore requires additional, separate consent to consent to engage in penetrative sex. Potentially, defining this as an ‘additional’ act places vaginal sex as the baseline act over which other acts are layered, reinforcing a hierarchy of sex acts (Cusack, 2013: Weeks, 1995). Cusack (2013) labelled three categories which described how online pornography could present consent for insemination. “Certain consent” was used to describe films which included an explicit discussion of the sex act in advance, and “possible consent” described films where it seemed likely that the actors had arranged consent in advance, but it was not shown in the film, or the on-screen communication was ambiguous (Cusack, 2013:101). Whilst a prior negotiation amongst the actors is vitally important to safeguard the performers and ensure that all involved are giving informed consent, if this does not translate to the scene itself, then the viewer is engaging with a scene which does not show consent, because any behind the scenes processes, would not be known to, or absorbed by, the viewer. They found that often, the dialogue expressing consent in these videos consisted of a desire or demand and agreement, rather than a question with an answer and thus showcases how consent dialogues or sexual negotiations can be framed as dirty talk (Cusack, 2013). This study demonstrated that consent is not often shown directly during porn films, rather the consumer is led to assume that consent as been agreed behind the scenes. Using porn in the methodology allowed a direct, explicit interrogation of pornography, consent and sexual values.

The studies above were investigating the presentation of consent in porn; however, studies have also used pornography as a tool within their methodologies to aid the

exploration of individuals' thoughts and feelings about consent. Dawson et al (2020) utilised pornography to uncover individuals' attitudes towards sexual consent, meanwhile, McKee et al (2021) explored the impact of porn consumption on attitudes towards sexual consent. Dawson et al (2020), argue for a greater understanding of the distinction between violent pornography and non-consensual porn. They note that previous studies have assumed that violent acts are always also non-consensual, ignoring the consensual practice of acts such as "whipping, choking, and slapping" within kink or fetish dynamics (Dawson, 2020:294). Therefore, the presentation of consent in pornography needs to be considered a separate issue from the acts showcased. The study involved identifying consensual and nonconsensual vignettes, considering the presence of consent separately to the sex acts shown. The paper explicitly describes the process of labelling each scene using the Delphi Method to gain consensus regarding the labels utilising a panel of experts in the field of consent (Dawson, 2020:298-99). However, the paper does not clearly state what constitutes a consensual or non-consensual pornographic vignette, the features present, or how consent/non-consent has been defined for the purpose of the study. The research team found that increased pornography engagement was associated with greater comfort with the consensual vignettes but did not result in increased comfort with the nonconsensual vignettes (Dawson, 2020:306). In addition, those who did not value sexual consent prior to engagement in the study were more comfortable with the nonconsensual vignettes (Dawson, 2020:306). Therefore, there was no found link between increased porn consumption and increased comfort with depictions of non-consensual sex.

Furthermore, it is important to note that unlike the current study, previous research which considers the potential positive influence of porn have been primarily directed towards women. Whereas this study considers porn as a useful tool when exploring men's experiences. Pornography has been explored as a tool for women to explore their sexuality in a way which has been historically discouraged, thus, empowering women to take ownership over their bodies and desires (Weinberg et al, 2010: 1390). Weinberg et al (2010: 1398) found that pornography consumption can lead to women normalising a greater range of sexual behaviours and feeling empowered regarding their sexuality, which results in higher levels of sexual experimentation, both solo and with sexual partners.

The women described how porn normalised sexual acts by demonstrating how they might be carried out practically (Weinberg et al (2010). Sex acts such as oral sex, seemed more pleasurable and were easier to understand when they were shown in porn as opposed to being discussed in theory (Weinberg et al, 2010: 1394). Thus, pornography led to broader sexual horizons amongst the women involved. Porn consumption was also described as empowering because it could counter sex-negative socialisation. One woman described that growing up in an environment where she was taught that sex was bad, led to a lack of openness and acceptance of sex and sexuality, which could be countered by the explicit presentations of sex in porn (Weinberg et al, 2010: 1395). Another participant in the study expressed that pornography and masturbation increased feelings of sexual autonomy and ownership over her own body and pleasure, which was empowering (Weinberg et al, 2010: 1391). Porn led to women feeling less afraid of sex, more confident about sex due to their increased sexual knowledge and more willing to directly ask for the types of sex they

desire (Weinberg et al, 2010: 1396). This also suggests that they may feel more comfortable communicating their boundaries and thus, giving or revoking their consent. Furthermore, Macleod (2021: 676) notes that due to polarising opinions amongst feminist groups about pornography, feminist women can feel conflicted, guilt or shame about their porn consumption. However, feminist women may use porn for the same commonly cited reasons as other groups; they are aroused and want to masturbate, they are bored or cannot relax, or sometimes, to learn about sex, for education and curiosity (Macleod, 2021: 676).

Yet, porn consumers are a diverse group and include a range of ages, genders, sexualities and backgrounds. Therefore, when considering what individuals might reflect on using porn or how it might influence them, it is important to understand that different people may learn different things (Albury, 2014: 172). What young heterosexual adults learn from porn tends to vary by gender (Dawson et al, 2022: 1265). This could be linked to the varying preferences of men and women regarding the type of porn they consume. Men tend to watch more hardcore porn with a focus on explicit sex acts, and women tend to prefer soft-core themes with a focus on sexuality or sensuality beyond genital sex acts (Weinberg et al, 2010:1390). Women consulted as part of Dawson et al's (2022) study reported that porn had taught them that a good sexual partner would focus on male pleasure and frequently perform manual and oral sex on their male partner. In contrast, the men were more concerned about how they were behaving during sex, rather than the acts they carried out (Dawson et al, 2022: 1265). The performance was the most key, reflecting findings that young men often feel a pressure to 'perform' an ideal masculine role during sex, to live up to hegemonic expectations (Connell, 2005; Davidson, 1997).

Overall, this study considers the understanding and practice of consent amongst young men who have sex with women and foregrounds the nature of their real-world experiences when they want to engage in consensual sex. The study further considers how their practices might be influenced by personal and wider contexts and social objects (such as media, education, and peer networks); and how young men might be aided to engage in further evaluation of their consent practices and share these with the researcher. As an explicit demonstration of sex, which has been used to aid reflection in past studies and used as a tool to aid reflection in educational settings (as detailed in the literature chapter) pornography can be a useful resource to facilitate and encourage sexual evaluations. IPA studies involve a process of in-depth reflection on personal experiences and feelings dually engaged in by the participant and researcher, so the methods were selected to encourage this process. Thus, pornography was embedded into the research design to invite a process of reflection and exploration grounded in explicit sexual examples and experiences.

3.7.3 Data Collection Stage 3: The Diaries

After the initial interview and receipt of the sample videos, participants completed diaries over a period of six weeks. The diary entry sheets prompted participants to describe their experience, how they gave or asked for consent and how they felt about the experience, as well as to reflect on the sample videos. The diary study was utilised to both encourage deeper thought regarding sexual consent and to gather data on these thoughts and how they might influence consent practices over the six-week period. The diaries ensured that evaluations were rooted in the participants' real-world

experiences. An additional benefit to embedding pornography into the methodology was that for participants who did not have any sexual experiences with another person over the study period, they could still reflect on their solo experiences with the sexually explicit material, ensuring that these discussions were also grounded in experience.

During this period, they were asked to complete diary entries following each time they engaged in sexual activity with another person, up to four entries per week. I reassured participants that they could have sex more frequently but did not need to provide more than four entries in any given week and that if they did not engage in any sexual activity in any given week, they did not need to complete any diary entries. I made it clear to participants that they should not try to alter their usual frequency of sexual activity whilst taking part in the study. The diaries also captured how the participants were engaging with the sample pornographic videos and any early reflections on these or comparisons to their sexual experiences. Thus together, the diaries and sample videos encouraged a deeper process of reflection and evaluation about how consent might be differently practised (the sample videos gave examples) and how the participants were practising consent in their own sexual encounters during the study period (the diaries asked about their own sexual experiences). The two methods of reflection complimented each other, with the diaries prompting participants to think more deeply about the sample videos and how consent might be communicated, and the sample videos prompting participants to compare and contrast to their sexual encounters and how they are communicating consent.

Diaries can give insights into participants' thoughts and feelings over a period of time and can be used to discover how these might change or develop (Thomas, 2017: 211). There are various types of diary studies which can be utilised during qualitative studies. For the present study, event-contingent diary entries were used and the participants were asked to complete an entry each time they engaged sexually with another person which enabled "the capture of rare events that would not necessarily be caught by fixed or random interval assessments" (Thomas, 2017: 208). Diaries can also be useful when exploring a sensitive topic, such as sex and consent, because they give participants a private, safe space to reflect alone on their experiences (Cudjoe, 2022: 2). In addition, when participants are asked in interview to think about examples of sexual encounters, it can be difficult to remember, whereas a diary can capture a recent memory and prompts participants to recall that memory in the second interview (Cudjoe, 2022: 2). Moreover, diaries can be useful in IPA studies, as diaries guide individuals to make sense of their personal and social worlds and the nature of their experiences because they encourage self-reflection (Morrell-Scott, 2018). Smith (1991) utilised diaries in an IPA study so the study participants could reflect on the topics of the interview/study and their experiences in their own way and record those things which feel most key to their experience.

Diary studies are also beneficial because "participant observation is one of the few methodological approaches in the social sciences which stresses direct observation of behaviour in situ", but the physical presence of a researcher may cause the participant to alter their normal routines, so the diary study allows self-reporting, of behaviour in situ, without the potential impact of the researcher's physical presence (Zimmerman and Wieder, 1977: 479). Diaries can be used to uncover a participant's

common behaviours as well as the “meaning and significance” applied to them, and thus helped to uncover how participants used consent and how they felt about consent (Zimmerman and Wieder,1977: 485). Zimmerman and Wieder (1977:491) suggest that diaries can be particularly useful when used in conjunction with a follow-up interview, as the interview can expand on any vague details or omissions. This approach was included in the research design of the present study.

3.7.4 Data Collection Stage 4: The Follow-up Interviews

After the participants had completed the diary entries and returned them to me, I arranged a follow-up interview. The purpose of these interviews was to build on any points made in the diary study, to allow participants to reflect on the past six weeks, and to share these reflections. The interview repeated similar prompts as used in the opening interview, asking about the participants’ practice and understanding of sexual consent, considering the past six weeks specifically. The interview was also used to ask participants to expand on points made in their diary entries, giving more details about what happened or providing additional insight into how they felt during the experience. These were conducted under the same conditions as the opening interview. The interviews were up to an hour in length, semi-structured, conducted over the telephone and the audio was recorded for transcription.

3.8 Data Analysis

The interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed in full before I started to analyse the data. The diaries were word-processed so they could be analysed directly. The data was analysed using guidelines for IPA studies as outlined by Smith, Flowers

and Larkin (2009:51). The first stage in the analysis process was to read and re-read all the full data sets, both interview transcripts and diary entries, to fully familiarise myself with the data. Then, as per guidelines created by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), the full data sets were organised into tables, with the data in the centre column and columns on either side for 'exploratory comments' and 'emerging codes'. I then undertook a long and detailed process of close reading the data and making exploratory comments. The data was analysed line by line and I made exploratory comments on three levels: descriptive comments (how they describe their experiences and the narratives they tell), linguistic comments (language choice, tone, pauses and hesitation, level of detail, emphasis and repetitions, foregrounded points and asides), conceptual comments (linking ideas to theory and previous research) (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009: 84-88). Next, the exploratory comments were summarised as initial codes and recorded in the corresponding column in the table.

As I analysed each data set, I gradually developed a record of emerging and recurring codes and ideas. With each data set considered, this record was altered, added to and nuances explored. This document gradually formed a record of the superordinate themes and subthemes grouped within (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009: 84-88). I engaged in a double hermeneutic process of reflection, evaluation and re-evaluation, revisiting previously collected data as more was collected. For example, as I collected more data, I noticed that different participants were engaging in similar patterns of behaviour to understand and communicate consent with their partners during sexual experiences. As more data was collected, the pattern gradually became clearer and was repeated more often. After a period of reflection, conducting additional reading and discussing ideas with my supervisors, I realised that the patterns of

communication enacted by the participants during sex resembled the patterns of communication outlined in Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) theory, with some key differences (the sexual context being the most notable as CMM is not regarding sexual communication) (Pearce, 2005). This gradually led to the development of my own theory: Coordinated Management of Consent (CMC) which is explained in detail in the discussion chapter.

I then revisited each full data set and noted where each sub-theme was present, to ensure that these themes accurately reflected the data set; the ideas and the exploratory comments applied to each participant's data. I then considered the reoccurring theoretical ideas and findings from previous literature in the field, which relate to and illuminate each superordinate theme. The final themes summarise and reflect the experiences and subjective perspectives of the participants.

3.9 Reflections on the Process of Curating the Sample Videos

During the diary-writing period of data collection, participants were asked to watch and reflect on a sample set of pornographic videos which demonstrated explicit consent. This research considers how individuals understand and communicate consent when they are aiming to have positive, consensual experiences with others; it is not about sexual harm. Thus, I decided that the sample materials needed to show positive experiences of consent, and that consent needed to be obvious to highlight this as the central point for reflection and discussion. Therefore, before the data collection could take place, I needed to curate a sample set of pornography with explicit consent.

I considered if other media might be suitable to aid reflection and discussion before settling on video pornography. I also considered included images or written vignettes, noting that these would also be sexually explicit in nature and so could also be considered different forms of pornography. However, written vignettes would not contain clear depictions of tone and body language, relying more on the reader's imagination, and risking misunderstandings between the researcher and participant when talking about specific examples. Video pornography was chosen because I felt the audio-visual medium allowed a clearer and more explicit demonstration of examples of sexual communication than images alone. It was also more accessible to me and they were likely to feel more familiar to the participants than written vignettes. Therefore, the sample porn videos functioned as expanded vignettes which presented scenarios with enhanced and explicit audio-visual information to prompt deep reflection and discussion about sexual consent.

3.9.1 Defining Pornography with Explicit Consent:

The first challenge in the process was to define pornography for the purposes of this study, and then more specifically, pornography with explicit consent. Pornography is not an easily definable object. Whether an object is labelled pornography as opposed to nude art, romantic fiction or an anatomical drawing, is determined by the subjective values of the onlooker. Pornography is made pornography by the viewers', albeit unconscious, decision to view it as such. Searle (1995) defines ideal social objects as "institutional facts" (p.2) because they require human institutions to exist. Furthermore, the construction of an ideal social object relies on three requirements, "the assignment of function, collective intentionality and constitutive rules" (Searle, 1995:13). Regarding pornography, a culture needs to assign a specific function, the production of sexual

arousal, agree the rules which constitute the use of this object, viewing for sexual pleasure, and collectively intend to view the object as pornography. For the purpose of this research, pornography is defined as sexually explicit media designed to arouse the consumer (Weinberg, Williams and Kleiner et al, 2010: 1391; Peter and Valkenburg, 2011: 751).

For this research, pornography with explicit consent was operationally defined as pornography which portrays the clear consent of all individuals involved for all sexual acts involved. Pornography can showcase what Fine (1988) terms “a discourse of erotics”, practical and visual guidance about how to initiate or perform specific sexual acts, which will not be present in school-based sexual education programmes (Albury, 2014: 173). This study will not conflate notions of violence and consent as they are separate ideas, instead, it considers how individuals give and understand agreement to engage in different sexual acts, regardless of the nature of those sexual acts (Dawson, Noone, Gabhainn and MacNeela, 2020:294).

3.9.2 How Suitable Videos Were Identified:

The procurement of the sample videos took place in the summer of 2022. All videos needed to be sourced from free porn websites to ensure they could be easily accessed and used for the study in line with the fair dealing exceptions to copyright law. Only studio-created videos were used rather than ‘homemade’ pornography to reduce the risk of using videos uploaded without the full knowledge and consent of the actors. The porn actors in studio films are more likely to have consented to participate following a regulated process. These were identified by a studio watermark on the

video, a studio name in the video title, or a clear storyline or characters which would likely only be purposefully performed by porn actors.

I was therefore using mainstream porn. The literature chapter has explored the potential risks of mainstream porn and impacts on consumers. A particular concern is that mainstream porn is mostly made for the male gaze guided by assumptions about heterosexual male sexual fantasies. This issue is most clearly demonstrated in the titles of the selected videos, which contain references to violent sex acts and derogatory terms for women and can be viewed in Appendix 13. Despite the problematic titles of the porn videos, all were selected because they showed examples of how consent might potentially be communicated. Instead the titles may be a stylistic/marketing choice, appealing to a presumed male fantasy to allow the video to stand out in a saturated market. Noted by Crespo-Fernández (2023: abstract), “in the context of male supremacy that straight pornography seems to exalt, the sexist and misogynistic connotations that euphemistic references carry are used with a strategic purpose intended to attract the interest of pornography consumers, stimulate their curiosity, and ultimately make them buy, rent or stream the film”.

As highlighted, the sample videos were chosen because they showcased consent however, they were sourced from mainstream porn sites and feature titles with sexist language. Therefore, the videos may have contained sexual acts and attitudes which could be considered objectifying towards women. These videos were used to aid reflection and conversation with the participants, so it is vital to acknowledge the possibility that the videos may have inadvertently negatively influenced the

participants and encouraged harmful beliefs towards women. However, my conversations with participants gave me the impression that they were respectful toward women and engaged with the videos with criticality, considering which aspects they believed to be good or poor regarding consent, communication and sexual wellbeing. In addition, participants were provided with a document with a detailed breakdown of the content and sex acts shown in each film, so they could give informed consent to watch the videos and take part in the study. This also helped to shift the participants' attention away from the titles and towards the content of each video.

Accounting for the potential risks, it was carefully decided that the potential benefits to the methodology (allowing deeper reflection about consent using explicit materials), safeguards to protect the participants (carefully selecting and only offering videos which included examples of consent) and potential benefits to the participants (engaging in a guided and monitored reflective process about consent with the potential to aid understanding and improve future practice), mitigated these risks.

Before I could begin sourcing, I needed to clearly state how I was defining explicit consent in the context of a pornographic film. Consent is often implied rather than explicit in the narratives of video pornography because it is assumed that the actors will have undergone consent processes behind the scenes to take part in the video. Therefore, I decided that for consent to be explicit in the context of a pornographic film, it needed to have a verbal element. The current model for best practice regarding explicit consent communication is the affirmative consent model which is described in the academic literature (Muehlenhard et al, 2016; Setty, 2021). Furthermore,

Jozkowski et al (2014)'s "external consent scale", describes how individuals may ask for consent or clearly indicate to another person that they consent to sexual activity, and was also consulted to produce the checklist. They describe how an initiator might clearly ask for consent, either verbally or non-verbally, such as initiating a behaviour but pausing to wait for reciprocation, verbally and directly asking if they would like to engage in any given behaviour or non-directly showing an interest in a sexual activity such as asking to get a condom (Jozkowski, 2014). The other party may then show that they consent to the suggestion either verbally or non-verbally. Verbal cues would often involve a verbal agreement, whilst explicit non-verbal cues involved moves to begin the suggested activity such as removing clothing, reciprocating touch or starting the suggested activity. Therefore, I decided that for consent to be explicit in a porn video, it must be obviously asked for and given.

In addition to the academic sources above, the checklist was developed using definitions of explicit sexual consent from trusted charitable authorities on sex education and sexual consent. *Brook* advises that consent should be a continuous conversation about what is and is not wanted during sex (Brook, 2022). This process should continue throughout a sexual experience to ensure consent for each new act (Brook, 2022). In addition, *Planned Parenthood's* sexual consent checklist was used to develop my explicit consent in pornography checklist. They define consent as "Freely Given" (there is no pressure, coercion or intoxication), "Reversible" (If consent is given and then an individual changes their mind, this is respected and the sexual act stops), "Informed" (consent is given in the full knowledge of what is going to happen), "Enthusiastic" (consent is given because the sexual act is wanted) and

“Specific” (consent is given for a specific sexual act and need to be given again for each new activity, this is achieved through checking in throughout sex).

However, as argued by Muehlenhard et al (2016: 465), there are “circumstances in which even an explicit ‘yes’ should not be interpreted as consent”, so I added these as caveats to the ‘Explicit Sexual Consent in Porn’ checklist. The sex education charity, *Brook*, defines sexual consent as “agreeing freely and with full capacity to engage in that activity”, therefore, coercion, incapacitation or pressure would invalidate an indication of consent, as the person is not freely able to make an informed choice (Brook, 2022). Affirmation can also not be taken as consent if the person does not fully understand what they are consenting to and what will happen (Muehlenhard et al, 2016: 465). These academic and organisational definitions of what constitutes explicit consent were used to produce my ‘Explicit Sexual Consent in Porn’ checklist. This checklist was used to judge if a film could be included in the study and was developed from literature which defines explicit consent and a copy can be found in Appendix 12. Thus, with an understanding of the potential issues regarding existing pornographic material, I decided not to select videos randomly, instead undertaking a purposive selecting approach to ensure the sample was suitable for its purpose.

The explicit sexual consent in porn checklist

Consent is often considered implicit in a pornographic film, and the viewer often assumes that consent has been agreed prior to filming. Therefore, for consent to be explicit in the context of a pornographic film, it must contain a verbal element.

Consent is a continuous process so an exchange of consent must be present between each new sexual act shown in the film.

One of the following must be present:

- Initiator asks for consent verbally and directly. E.g.: 'Can I do X to you?', 'Shall I get a condom?', 'Do you wanna X?'.
- Initiator makes a request or suggestion for their partner to agree to. E.g.: 'Get on the bed', 'It would be really hot if you did X', 'I'd like it if you did X'.

AND

One of the following must be present:

- Receiver gives consent verbally and directly. E.g.: 'yes', 'uhhuh', 'I'd like that'.
- Receiver gives consent non-verbally and directly. E.g.: nods, takes clothes off, begins the suggested activity.

AND

There are no verbal pressures or coercive comments such as threats or repeated asking.

Consent is given enthusiastically, willingly or with a positive attitude.

All involved appear sober, understanding and adult in the film.

Figure 3: The explicit sexual consent in porn checklist created for this study

3.9.3 The Systematic Technique Used to Gather the Sample Videos:

A table of the final sample group of videos used in the study can be found in Appendix 13. I developed a systematic technique to source the pornographic films to be used in the study to avoid repetitive searching or covering the same ground multiple times. This technique was inspired by other porn studies and the methods they used to source examples of mainstream porn. "Mainstream porn" (p.137) is defined by Mikkola

(2019) as a variety of pornography viewed frequently, mostly on accessible online sites. This style of pornography is designed for a target audience of heterosexual men and focuses mostly on the woman involved, her body and actions (Mikkola, 2019:137). Using mainstream porn was useful during the sourcing process because it is freely available online and thus I could search through a large volume to find examples with explicit consent. It is also designed for a target audience of men who have sex with women, my participants, and is the type of porn participants are most likely to be familiar with and potentially more comfortable watching.

McKee et al (2008) conducted a study on the content of mainstream porn. As the study was conducted in 2008 before internet pornography was as widespread as it is today, they frequented adult video stores and asked the shopkeepers to direct them to their topmost borrowed videos. This allowed them to survey the most frequently viewed videos, the most mainstream. To conduct a similar study today, a researcher could search the 'most popular' pages of the most frequently visited porn websites. Klaassen and Peter (2015) conducted a systematic search of online pornography for their content analysis of instances of gender inequality in internet porn. For each website, the researchers selected the top 100 videos of the month in which the data collected was conducted (February 2013), resulting in a large collection of 400 videos.

To start the process of collecting my sample videos, I first conducted a Google search: 'most popular porn websites'. I visited the websites, generated by the Google search, which recommend pornographic websites and I cross-referenced the most frequently recommended websites. The porn websites unanimously recommended as most

popular were: *xVideos*, *PornHub*, *xHamster* and *XNXX*. The most popular websites were most likely to have the largest volume of different videos and so most likely to have videos which met my specific requirements. I then systematically searched through each website, visiting the top ten pages of the 'monthly most watched' categories for June–September 2022. I read each video title and did not watch if the title demonstrated that the video would not show consent as required in my 'sexual consent in porn checklist'. For example, a sexual role play such as student/ teacher would not portray a useful exchange of consent due to the power imbalance in the fantasy, or a non-consensual motif such as the 'stuck under the bed' theme. Whilst I understand that these are simply fantasies and consent would be discussed prior to engagement in the activity, in a pornographic setting, the communication prior to the sexual act is often not filmed and so the video itself does not show the careful negotiation of consent which should accompany acting out these fantasies. Potential videos were played with subtitles to see if there was any communication present or hint that consent may be verbally discussed. If I thought that a video might contain an instance of explicit consent, I watched the video again carefully, listening to what was said between the actors. I then recorded potential videos in a large spreadsheet, with a link, date accessed, timestamps of interest, content list and a summary of how consent was shown. I finally revisited my longlisted videos with my 'consent in porn checklist', to create a shortlist of videos which best represented explicit consent as defined by the checklist. Once I had my final collection of sample videos I edited them into shorter clips, each showing the example of consent and then the corresponding sexual acts. I also edited the audio of the videos to make the speech clearer and louder, so that the verbal consent could be heard.

During this process, I noticed that verbal consent in pornography seemed to fall into three main styles. Some videos included a conversation at the start of the video in which the female actor, the focus of heterosexual mainstream porn aimed at a male audience, was asked about her tastes, what she is excited about and wants to do and gives consent to a variety of acts before the scene begins. This was more common in kink or fetish videos, to make it clear to the viewer that these less normalised sex acts are being conducted consensually. This method is the most obvious but is less specific and not continuous. Other videos included questions throughout the video, whereby the initiator would ask their partner to carry out various sex acts and they would either respond verbally (saying yes) or non-verbally by nodding or moving to start the suggested activity. The third style of verbal consent is similar to the latter but the initiator makes a demand rather than a question and then waits for a consenting response, either verbally, or non-verbally. These methods are more nuanced and require better attention to body language and small signals but are more specific and show a continuous process of 'checking in'.

3.10 Research Ethics

This project was approved by the University of Birmingham Ethics Committee, reference number: ERN_22-0411. As a researcher, I had a "responsibility to ensure that the physical, social and psychological well-being of research participants is not adversely affected by the research" so all measures needed to be taken to protect participants' wellbeing (British Sociological Association, 2017: 2). Sociological research can be distressing if it intrudes into their "private or personal worlds" or causes "unnecessary anxiety", so I reassured participants that they were in control of

what they chose to disclose to me and acted as a supportive presence in cases of anxiety (British Sociological Association, 2017: 4).

Participant consent was crucial to this study and I needed to ensure that I had consent prior to each stage of the data collection process. The research concerns highly sensitive topics and is about consent so the methods needed to model good consent principles. The participant information sheet contained detailed information about the nature and purpose of the research and explained what would happen at each stage of the data collection process. The British Sociological Association (2017) states that research participation “should be based on the freely given informed consent of those studied” (p.3), thus, I needed to ensure participants fully understood what participation would involve, how their data is being stored and used and that they had the opportunity to ask any questions before consenting to take part. The participants were sent a new consent form to read and sign before each stage could commence. The consent form regarding receipt of the pornographic materials was the most detailed. It included a content description of each available video clip. Participants were then asked to read and initial next to the descriptions of each video they were happy to receive and watch. They were then only sent the agreed videos, to ensure that participants were not sent upsetting content. I also reassured participants that once they had received videos, they could decide which videos to watch and how frequently and I only asked that they commit to watching at least one video weekly to ensure continued contact with the material. I reassured participants that they could ask me any questions at any time during their participation in the research. Participant consent forms and information sheets can be found in appendices 4-8.

Participants were informed of their right to withdraw and told how they might withdraw in the participant information sheet given prior to the start of the research process. Participants could contact me to withdraw at any point up until four weeks following the completion of the data collection process, at which point data will be in the process of analysis. At the end of their second and final interview, they were reminded of their four-week deadline to withdraw and given an exact deadline.

The interview prompts may have produced discomfort or embarrassment for the participants, so I allowed participants to skip any prompts they did not wish to answer and reassured them that the interview could be paused or ended at any time. During the interviews, I asked the participants about how they would recognise consent was being given first, and only asked about when consent might have been difficult or confusing later in the interview as these questions might be more worrying to answer. These were ethical considerations to try to make the participants feel as comfortable as possible. I was asking personal questions which could at times result in the participant becoming emotional, in these cases, I acted as a reassuring presence, empathising and emphasising that I understood and that they could pause for as long as needed. In times when a worried participant asked for advice, I reassured them that I understood but that I was not able to advise, and that following the completion of the study, I would send them useful resources and places to go to for advice.

The most concerning risk associated with this research was that participants may disclose or realise that they have experienced sexual abuse or assault during the data collection process. In this case, I planned to reassure the participants that they do not need to continue the discussion if they feel distressed. I would also provide the

participant with supportive online resources and let them know who they can speak to within, or outside the university for further support and services and tell them that it is their choice to report the crime if they want to. I would clarify to the participants that they do not need to report the crime if they do not want to. There is also the risk that a participant may realise, because of the study and an improved understanding of sexual consent, that they have accidentally assaulted someone in the past. To help those who may have realised that they have been assaulted or assaulted another due to a now improved understanding of consent at the end of the data collection process, all participants were given a resource sheet, which directed them to places they could go to for help, education, support and reporting. If a participant admitted to knowingly committing a crime, and there is a clear and immediate risk to another, especially if this risk is to a child, I would have needed to report this to the police.

The participants were ensured full confidentiality during the analysis and write up processes. I only required an email address and phone number to identify and contact each participant and interviews were audio-only. Data were recorded and analysed using ID codes and reported using pseudonyms so they would not be identifiable in the write-up or any future outputs. The document linking each ID code to the corresponding contact details was kept in a password-protected folder, to protect the participants' details. The data was stored securely and only accessible to myself and my supervisors. IT services were informed of the project and consulted regarding the best way to store the sample videos and participant data on university systems.

3.11 Reflexivity

It is crucial to keep reflexivity at the heart of IPA studies as the researcher's own perspectives will impact interpretation of the participants' experience within the double hermeneutic so I was reflexive throughout the data collection and analysis processes. I was reflecting on the participants' reflections over the study period so their unique context impacted their experiences and what they shared with me, and my unique context impacted my interpretation of their narratives.

Mabry (2008) argues that "researchers are usually outsiders to the cases they study", they have some "psycho-socio-emotional distance" (p.217) between themselves and the participants. In this study, I am not a part of the group I am studying; I am not a man who has sex with women. It is important to reflexively consider my worldview to consider the impact this position might have had on the collection and interpretation of the data.

This study is the product of my ongoing research journey from my first undergraduate research project. As an undergraduate student in English Literature, I became fascinated by evolving sexual values across different time periods and within different artistic movements, which caused me to think more deeply about the subjectivity of sexual norms and different experiences of sexuality. My undergraduate dissertation considered the presentation of sexual norms and taboo in Victorian and modern popular fiction and considered the relationship between popular fiction and wider social attitudes. As a master's student, I shifted my focus from considering sexuality in fiction to sexuality in the social world. For my MRes thesis, in sexuality and gender

studies, I explored UK school-based sex education provision, gathering qualitative survey data from young people about their experiences. I found the central issue to be that sex education tends to talk around sex, discuss topics in theory, rather than talking about sex. This led me to consider how teaching about sexual communication and consent may be lost when the topics are not discussed directly in the context of within sexual experiences. The research project also showed the prevalence of fear-based approaches and absence of discussions of pleasure. I considered, when sex is portrayed as scary and unpleasant thinking about consent as an enthusiastic agreement makes little sense because sex is not described as an experience someone would want to enthusiastically agree to take part in. Therefore, I wanted to explore how young adults understand and practice consent, and where their concepts originate from, when sex education on the topic is often limited. I also undertook the first year of a sex and relationships therapy qualification which I intend to complete after my PhD and which showcased the importance of open sexual communication in relationships. I would term myself a sexualities researcher because I have worked within different subject areas but have a sustained focus on sexual behaviours and values. I find sexuality a fascinating topic as it is rarely openly discussed but is guided by a plethora of norms and taboos. I want to work to better understand and challenge such norms and destigmatise open sexual communication. My previous work has led me to develop an increasing interest in real-world behaviours and personal experiences of sexuality, which has influenced the topic of this PhD and how the research was conducted.

As a woman, I am distanced from the group, men who have sex with women, and will not share or understand their life experiences which are unique to how men are

treated, perceived and feel, as men. Being a woman may also have impacted the data collection process because as previous literature has explored, gendered dynamics can impact the interview process (Schwalbe and Wolkomir, 2002). In the interview context, men can feel a pressure to 'perform' their idealised idea of masculinity and use the opportunity to present their best self, meanwhile, the interview process can feel like a threat whereby their masculinity is interrogated and undermined (this is heightened if, as with the present study, the interview topic is related to masculinity directly) (Schwalbe and Wolkomir, 2002: 205). Men are also likely to partake in socially desirable responding, which may not be conscious, assessing "the interviewer's orientations and opinions" to "develop their responses within a gendered context" to answer questions in a way which they perceive to be desirable or fit with the masculine identity they want to present (Olliffe and Mroz, 2005). Positioning the interviewee as an expert by experience and allowing him to open up in his own way and time can make him feel more at ease and less likely to feel threatened, uncomfortable and act out or shut down, and thus this approach was taken by the researcher to encourage an open and comfortable conversation (Schwalbe and Wolkomir, 2002).

However, regardless of these measures, there is a risk that a woman interviewing a man may result in gendered dynamics which are harmful to the research and the individuals' wellbeing. Men can engage in sexualising when women researchers make them feel too exposed or like their masculinity is threatened by the interview context, to undermine her and challenge her legitimacy as interviewer (Schwalbe and Wolkomir, 2002; Gailey and Prohaska, 2011). Gailey and Prohaska (2011) note that when women researchers are interviewing men about sexual topics these risks can be more pronounced and their team experienced male participants flirting, making

crude or suggestive remarks, and undermining the researcher's ability to conduct the interview 'correctly' (Gailey and Prohaska, 2011). They also noted that participants would openly talk about other women in a derogatory way, defying expectations that they might engage in socially desirable responding as part of their flirtations (Gailey and Prohaska, 2011). The researchers posed that this might be because they were close to the participants in age, so they could consider the interviewers as peers and the setting as more informal (Gailey and Prohaska, 2011). Potentially as I was close to my participants in age despite the gender difference, my status as 'peer' might have mitigated against the risk of socially desirable responding, however, this cannot be known. I also did not experience any harassment or sexually inappropriate behaviour, likely because I had personal safeguards in place. Safeguards to protect my own wellbeing as a researcher included: clearly communicating the purpose of the research to prevent inappropriate behaviour based in misunderstandings, conducting the interview via telephone to provide a level of safety and distance, and feeling prepared to end the interview early if inappropriate behaviour did occur.

Prior to data collection, I was concerned that the participants may feel less comfortable sharing intimate details with me as a woman, and would have felt more comfortable with a male interviewer. I had prepared a series of safeguards to ensure participant wellbeing if my research participants were uncomfortable with me as an interviewer such as reassuring them that they could take their time, skip any questions they wanted to or end the interview at any time. I opened the interview with warm-up questions and gradually built rapport. I also ensured them that the interview was a private (as they will be anonymised and the call was taken in a private space) and non-judgemental conversation.

Conversely, participants in this study expressed before and after the interview that they felt more comfortable with me, as they would not feel comfortable sharing vulnerably with men. Moreover, participants shared openly and gave detailed descriptions of their experiences with me, whilst also asserting that they would not talk about sex with men they are close to because they do not value their opinion or feel their friends are not open to an earnest conversation. This also gave additional subtext suggesting a reduced comfort talking with men about sex.

“I wouldn't feel comfortable asking my friends... I wouldn't like want their opinions because I mean, you get a lot of bias... Just guys, I felt like a lot of guys have inflated egos about how good they are” (Eric)

I haven't really talked to my friends much about sex...We've never really talked about much about sex. We talk about girls...have a bit of banter about the girls we all thought were hot, but we never really discussed like our sex lives and how we felt about our sex lives.” (Owen)

I also made an effort to react neutrally and empathetically to their stories, to ask open-ended questions so the participants could share what was important to them, and not pass judgement on their sexual preferences or behaviours.

Although participants said they felt more comfortable, a male researcher may have been equally able to build comfort, rapport and navigate the impact of the participant's alignment with masculine norms on the interview process. Men interviewing men will also experience the participants' masculine identity impacting the interview process but Oliffe and Mroz (2005) note that this can be managed and men can build trust.

They note that a non-threatening, casual, punctual and organized interviewer is essential to establishing an atmosphere conducive to men talking freely without distraction” (Olliffe and Mroz, 2005: 258). They also explain that participants can feel a desire to control and lead the conversation to feel comfortable because this reaffirms a traditional masculine identity, so they start with open, low stakes questions first to build rapport and then engage in deeper conversation about feelings and experiences once comfort has been built (Olliffe and Mroz, 2005). When gendered dynamics and expectations associated with masculine behaviour can impact and interrupt interviews with men and both male and female researchers, it is unclear how large an impact my gender had on the interview process (Schwalbe and Wolkomir, 2002).

I also needed to ensure that, as a woman who has sex with men and who has been on the receiving end of men’s consent communication, I was reflective about how my own experiences may have impacted my interpretation of the participants’ narratives. I have had positive and healthy sexual experiences with men, but like many women, I have also experienced sexual harassment, sexual assault, sexism and abuse from men. My interpretations of men’s behaviours and communications during my own positive and negative experiences, may have impacted my interpretations and analyses of the participants’ narratives. My own preferred consent strategies may also have impacted interpretation. De Craene (2022) argues that researchers need to address and reflect on their erotic subjectivities during the research process, particularly when they are conducting sex research. Their positionality as a sexual individual may impact how the research is conducted and can help to “shed light on the context in which we conduct research” (p.2).

Furthermore, philosophically, the research was conducted from a sex-positive and sex-critical, feminist perspective. Sex-positivity refers to an acceptance of sexuality and “sexual organs”, and the belief that sex can be healthy and pleasurable (Bennion, 1991:15). The stance avoids making “moralistic value statements” about sex, and advocates for people to have the freedom to make “personal choices” regarding sex (Brickman and Fitts Willoughby, 2017: 622). The sex-critical perspective invites greater critical thinking and deeper analysis of the norms and ideologies behind all sexual behaviours and forms of sexuality. The approach is defined by Downing, (2013): “What is key in the approach I am calling ‘sex-critical’ is that all forms of sexuality should be equally susceptible to critical thinking about the normative or otherwise ideologies they uphold. Assertions that given sexual practices, fantasies, orgasms, etc., are either ‘good’ or ‘bad’ are gross simplifications” (p.95).

To ensure that I maintained constant cognitive access during the data collection process, I needed to use a language known to the participants. Cognitive access refers to a process of ensuring that participants and the researcher can understand each other during data collection. In the context of my study, this often meant using slang terms for sexual acts rather than scientific/ academic terms; for example, ‘blowjob’ as opposed to ‘fellatio’ or ‘oral sex on a penis’. As interviews progressed, I would use the language used by the participant during that interview. For example, if they referred to their sexual partner as a ‘girlfriend’ or ‘partner’ or ‘friend’, I would refer to them using the same word. I also needed to nurture my relationships with participants during the process and keep in contact with them, making them feel supported and appreciated.

In addition, how sex research is perceived as a field, impacted how this research was conducted. Previous researchers in the UK have reflected on the position of sex research as a form of “dirty work”, which can act as a barrier during the research process (Irvine, 2014). It is often not valued as highly as other topics by UK institutions, sexualities journals are considered less prestigious and there are fewer opportunities for sexualities lecturers (McCormack, 2014: 675). Furthermore, researchers have reflected on the experience of being a woman in the field of sexuality research, as I am. During the ethical review process, concerns were raised that felt particularly gendered or based on gendered assumptions. There were concerns about my safety when talking to male participants about sexual behaviour; that they may behave in an inappropriate or predatory manner with me. This follows the stereotypical and deficit-based assumption that men are inherently a sexual risk, whilst women are at risk of being victimised. To address the committee’s concerns, interviews needed to be conducted via the telephone to create physical distance and I explained that I would turn to my supervisors to advise if I experienced any wellbeing issues. There were also concerns that I may be psychologically or emotionally harmed by viewing the content of mainstream online pornography whilst gathering the sample set for the study. Despite these concerns my own previous experiences and the experiences of other researchers suggest that this is not an issue because I am a consenting adult who is knowingly choosing to view and engage with the material.

My experiences as a young female sexualities researcher reflected the experiences of other researchers in similar contexts. Keene (2022) reflected on the issues she

faced as a young female PhD student in 2015, whilst trying to gain approval for her pornography study. Keene expresses that “concerns about researchers’ safety risks are likely well-intentioned but concerns for the safety of sexuality researchers can be gendered in nature”, and that she was advised to conduct interviews in safe spaces and to have someone nearby to “protect” her, “protect appeared to draw on stereotypical, gendered assumptions about the type of person who views pornography (men) and their perceived dangerousness” (Keene, 2022: 682). Brooks (2018) also explained that female sex researchers can face barriers whilst navigating institutional ethics review boards. She commented that ethical concerns were rooted in gendered assumptions; “fear as to whether I might be a sex-crazed woman, a ‘pervert’, or I might be a naïve pure woman, where they are responsible for protecting me against corruption” (Brooks, 2018: 32). Thus, research ethics are “not only institutional, but as I shall argue, also highly personal”, and gender stereotypes and norms can impact the type of research carried out and how it is conducted (Brooks, 2018: 32). The experiences shared by Brooks (2018) and Keene (2022) mirrored mine, and showed how gendered assumptions at an institutional level can impact what research is carried out and the methods allowed.

In summary, my specific identity and personality impacted the data that was collected. It impacted what participants shared with me, what they emphasised and how they narrativised their experiences for me and another researcher would likely hear different experiences from the same participants. My personal circumstances also impacted the analysis process as I reflected on the participants’ reflections during the IPA process.

3.12 Methodology Summary

To summarise, this research project is an IPA study which utilises an interpretivist, qualitative design and a phenomenological approach to understand subjective experiences and perceptions of consent. The project explores the understanding of consent amongst a group of young men who have sex with women at a UK university. Data were collected via a six-week process undertaken by each participant. The participants first took part in a semi-structured interview about their present understanding and practice of sexual consent. They were then sent a sample set of pornographic videos which showcased explicit consent and were asked to watch at least one video weekly, over a six-week period. During this six-week period, they also took part in a diary study. They were invited to use the diaries to reflect on their sexual experiences over the period, consent and the content of the videos. Finally, they took part in a second follow-up interview, during which they were encouraged to voice their reflections on how consent was presented in the videos, and how this may, or may not, relate to their understanding and practice of consent when they have sex. Interviews were semi-structured to allow participants to lead and discuss what was most important to them and their experiences. The data collection process guided participants through a reflective journey, through which they were encouraged to think more deeply about their experiences of consent and what consent means to them.

IPA methods were used to analyse the data, to gain an in-depth understanding of how each participant individually conceptualised and practised consent. Consent is a subjective and personal notion which is highly guided by experience. The findings cannot be generalised beyond the study participants but provide an interesting insight into the nature of their experiences and may have wider implications. Reflexivity as a

researcher was vital, as the analysis involved a double hermeneutic of interpretation because I was interpreting the participants' interpretations of their experiences, so I needed to explore how I, as the researcher, have influenced the production of the data. Furthermore, research ethics were highly important as the subject area is sensitive and I needed to put measures in place to protect the participants' wellbeing.

4 FINDINGS OVERVIEW

4.1 A Summary of The Participants and Their Contexts

In total, 11 participants took part in the research. Nine were UK students, two were international students. Seven were white, one Asian, one black and two mixed-race. In the group, there were two 19-year-olds, five 20-year-olds, one 22-year-old, one 23-year-old, and two 25-year-olds. All participants were sexually interested in women but had a range of sexual identities. Five were heterosexual, one sapphic, three bisexual and 2 questioning their sexuality. Ten were cisgender men, whilst one participant was gender fluid. The gender-fluid participant explained that they chose to be included in the study as advertised for 'men who have sex with women' because they have masculine days and feminine days and only engage sexually with others (only women) on days when they feel masculine and they were socially read as male and treated as a man by others. Therefore, they felt that their sexual experiences were from a masculine perspective, fitting the study requirements. When describing their demographic groups for the study, participants were invited to describe their identities in their own terms.

Pseudonym	Research Stages Completed			Age	Ethnicity	Sexuality	Gender Identity
Tim	Interview 1	Diary Study	Interview 2	20	White British	Heterosexual	Man
Zixin	Interview 1	Diary Study	Interview 2	23	Chinese	Heterosexual	Man
Frank	Interview 1	Diary Study	Interview 2	25	White and Black Caribbean	Bisexual	Man

Ellis	Interview 1	Diary Study	Interview 2	20	White British	Sapphic ¹	Gender fluid
John	Interview 1	Diary Study	Interview 2	22	White British	Heterosexual	Man
Chris	Interview 1	No sex so no diaries	Interview 2	25	White British	Heterosexual/ Questioning Pansexual	Man
Henry	Interview 1	No sex so no diaries	Interview 2	19	White	Bisexual	Man
Owen	Interview 1	Did not finish (DNF)	Did not finish (DNF)	20	White British	Heterosexual	Man
Chima	Interview 1	DNF	DNF	19	Black British	Heterosexual	Man
Eric	Interview 1	DNF	DNF	20	White British	Heterosexual/ Questioning Biromantic	Man
Dylan	Interview 1	DNF	DNF	20	White and Indian	Bisexual	Man

Table 1: A table of the study participants

The participants were given culturally relevant pseudonyms by the researcher. These are used to refer to the participants throughout this thesis. The participants involved in the study were all students at a UK research university, some undertaking

¹ A woman, feminine or non-binary person who is attracted to women/ feminine people but who also might be attracted to other genders.

undergraduate and others postgraduate degrees. Many students lived with peers and friends or lived in a close, youthful community with fellow students: a unique social context which influenced their experiences. In addition, the participants were likely to be a similar class background and to have experienced privilege, as evidenced by their access to higher education at a prestigious university. Furthermore, the university in question has an online education module on sexual consent for its undergraduate students. Students can opt out of this, but its presence indicates that the university culture is thinking about consent and there is a new drive to increase sexual consent awareness on campus.

The study participants were engaging sexually in a variety of contexts, some engaging in casual sex and others in relationships of varying lengths and commitments. There were some lived experiences widely shared across the group which help to contextualise the participants' experiences of sex and consent. Many noted that they felt like they had learnt more about consent with age and experience. Their sex education was inconsistent and they did not readily remember lessons on consent. Many of the participants were anxious about consent due to stories about rape and assault in the news and made an obvious effort to present themselves in the interviews as highly valuing consent, reiterating the importance of consent without prompt. Some also wanted to distance themselves from other men who may be less thorough about consent or more dominant during sex. They were very worried about false allegations and felt the weight of current discourses about young men and harmful sexual behaviour. Similarly, Setty (2023) found this to be the case with adolescent boys, showing that potentially this anxiety is continued from the teenage years into young adulthood.

There were repeated worries about sexual relationships and sexual performance. Some participants had experienced sexual dysfunction or performance anxiety and had either no idea why this was happening or were troubled by sexual myths. They felt like they could not talk to their friends, particularly male friends, about their worries, and would instead privately Google concerns. They explained these worries to me, the interviewer, as they did not feel like they had anywhere else to go for help or advice. I explained that I could not offer advice but could direct them to reputable online sources and organisations that could help.

Seven out of the 11 participants explained that they preferred more relatable pornography because it felt more homemade, showed more pleasure, had a clear narrative or invited the use of imagination. Most did not like the sample videos which showed rough sex (consensual sex featuring behaviours on a continuum from increased physical force to BDSM) or anal sex because these felt unrealistic and detached from their lived experiences of sex. The videos were selected to show a range of acts, some more intimate, others rougher, and oral, vaginal and anal sex were shown. They also preferred porn with women they found more attractive and did not like it when the female performers were particularly slim or had obvious plastic surgery, as this felt unrealistic. However, there is a possibility that when discussing porn preferences, the participants were impacted by the interview environment and purposefully or inadvertently saying what they thought would be a preferred response. Furthermore, men with less widely accepted or encouraged ideas about porn may not have felt comfortable taking part, resulting in a skew amongst the sample. Most of the

participants highlighted video 4 as their favourite because it felt the most realistic (See Appendix 13 for the sample video list). Interestingly, this was created by a feminist porn studio. Summaries of the key experiences shared by participants relating to their sexuality, relationships, pornography use and feelings about sex and relationships can be found in Appendix 2.

4.2 A Summary of the Final Data Set

In total, 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted and 26 diary entries were completed. 11 initial interviews were carried out and seven participants continued to the next stages of the study. These seven received and watched the sample pornographic videos over a period of six weeks and filled in a diary entry each time they had any type of sexual contact with another person with their reflections on the experience. They then took part in the second reflective, semi-structured interview. Out of the seven individuals who completed the research process over the six-week period, five completed diary entries. Two did not fill in any diary entries because they did not have any sexual experiences with another person over the six-week period.

4.3 A Summary of the Superordinate Themes

The IPA process detailed in the methodology resulted in the creation of three superordinate, overarching themes. These themes highlight the key aspects of the participants' experiences of consent, how they understood consent and communicated it with their sexual partners and the nature of their real-world consent practice.

Superordinate theme 1: PHYSICAL CONSENT COMMUNICATION DURING SEXUAL EXPERIENCES

Superordinate theme 2: TALKING AND UNDERSTANDING BEYOND SEXUAL EXPERIENCES

Superordinate theme 3: REFLECTING ON AND EVALUATING NEW INFORMATION AND IDEAS ABOUT CONSENT

Overall, the participants utilised mostly non-verbal, physical consent communication during sexual encounters. By physical consent communication, I mean communication via physical signals, suggestions and cues, rather than verbal (such as moving closer, leaning in, moving towards a sex act, slow tentative touch etc...). This communication was ongoing, nuanced and impacted by contextual factors relating to themselves, their relationship and wider social context. They felt that their non-verbal communication during sex was aided by more explicit conversations about sex outside of a sexual experience. Developing wider, clearer communications about sex, boundaries and desires made it feel easier for them to read signals and communicate via physical cues when in the moment. Finally, the methodology involving diaries and sample pornography was successful in inviting a process of deeper reflection over the study period. The pornography, as an explicit resource, was used as a tool to bounce ideas off and to ground reflections in experience rather than theory. The diaries then helped participants to turn this reflection to their own real-world sexual experiences.

The following three findings chapters will detail each superordinate theme in turn and present the supporting analysis of the participants' data.

5 FINDINGS: SUPERORDINATE THEME 1: PHYSICAL CONSENT COMMUNICATION DURING SEXUAL EXPERIENCES

5.1 Superordinate Theme 1 Introduction

The following findings chapters describe and explain the participants' data and the nature of their experiences regarding how they understand and practice consent and how this might be influenced by personal and cultural contextual factors. As is typical for IPA research, the findings chapters present each overarching superordinate theme in turn and what was learnt about each participant with regards to that theme (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009: 110). The findings chapters contain close readings of the participants' data, "what they said and what that means to them" (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009: 112). The research will be presented from the participants' first-person perspectives, their narratives will be given from their viewpoints, highlighting how they felt, and how they have specifically experienced consent in their lives in the past and during the study period. In total, the analysis process produced three overarching superordinate themes. These themes were developed from the participants' data in their two interviews and diary entries, in which, they reflect on their sexual experiences and the presentation of sexual encounters in the sample pornographic videos.

This chapter focuses on the first theme, 'physical consent communication during sexual experiences', which relates to the participants' use of what I am terming 'physical consent communication'. This refers to the use of physical signalling to request, give and revoke consent during sexual experiences. I have used the term 'physical communication' rather than 'non-verbal communication', because 'non-verbal' gives the impression of an absence of intentional communication. In contrast,

this theme highlights that although consent may not be communicated with words, it can be communicated purposefully, consciously and mindfully using physical forms of communication. This chapter will outline how the participants used mostly physical consent communication during sexual experiences to practise consent and how this relates to their conceptualisation of what constitutes sexual consent. The superordinate theme directly relates to and answers the first research sub-question: how do young men who have sex with women conceptualise and practice consent?

The superordinate theme has been divided into five sub-themes which together build a picture of the participants' physical communication strategies and how this relates to how they conceptualise and practice consent. The sub-themes explain that although most of the participants defined ideal consent practice as largely verbal, often stating the affirmative consent model as their definition of consent, they did not often use verbal consent strategies. Instead, they used more physical communication techniques. Physical communication could function less consciously with participants feeling consent or non-consent as an atmosphere created through many small physical cues. Alternatively, physical communication could be more conscious and purposeful with participants using gestures to query consent and actively looking for physical responses. Participants were more likely to use verbal communication if they were already largely sure of consent via physical strategies. Although physical consent communication could feel highly effective to the participants, it was complicated by gendered assumptions and gender norms could lead to incorrect assumptions about the meaning of physical cues.

These sub-themes are defined and presented in the table below:

ASKING DIRECTLY	The participants conceptualised ideal, verbal consent as a direct question and answer which contrasted their largely non-verbal, yet nuanced, practice.
USING PHYSICAL CONSENT COMMUNICATION	The participants navigated consent as a physical form of communication feeling willingness or discomfort as a tone or atmosphere.
INITIATING AND RECIPROCATING	The participants followed a mutual, reciprocal dance of initiation and acceptance to navigate consent as a sexual experience changes and progresses.
ASKING FOR REASSURANCE	If the participants were to ask for consent verbally, this would only happen after they were mostly certain of their partner's consent via non-verbal signals, for confirmation.
MAKING GENDERED ASSUMPTIONS	Consent practice and non-verbal signalling were complicated by gendered stereotypes and assumptions about consent and sexual desire.

Table 2: Table of the sub-themes within Superordinate Theme 1

This chapter presents each sub-theme in turn; with a summary of the nature of the sub-theme followed by an exploration of how it was experienced by each participant and evidenced in each participant's data.

5.2 Sub-theme: Asking Directly

The first sub-theme, 'asking directly', explores how the participants defined ideal consent as a verbal communication. Five of the participants defined ideal consent as a verbal question asked directly and immediately prior to sex, such as 'Do you want to have sex?', 'Yes'. Potentially this is due to the way affirmative consent is taught in sex education, as a simple, legalistic and direct exchange, directly prior to sex (Bragg et al, 2021; Setty, 2022). When verbal consent is conceptualised in this way, it can be understood as something overly direct, potentially robotic and therefore unappealing,

rather than a fluid form of communication (Edwards, Rehmanand & Byers, 2022; Shumlich & Fisher, 2020; Wignall, Stirling & Scoats, 2022). The participants expressed that consent could be done effectively without this direct questioning. They also might use language which the researcher has interpreted as 'dirty talk', aiming to simultaneously arouse as well as communicate desires and boundaries, or other nuanced forms of communication to talk about sexual desires and boundaries effectively and explicitly, both during the acts and before, but did not conceptualise this as verbal consent as it was not a direct and succinct question and answer. Thus, there is an incongruence between their conceptualisation of explicit consent (as simple but verbal) and how they practice consent with their partners (as nuanced, ongoing, but mostly non-verbal). This was particularly evident in the difference between how they described their ideals at the interview and the behaviours they noted in their diaries.

One of the participants, John, who had a long-term long-distance girlfriend reiterated this definition in an interview: "That's what I meant when I said explicit, like at the start: "Do you want it or not?". For John, for consent to be defined as explicit consent it needed to be asked directly before a sexual encounter. Otherwise, it would not meet his understanding of explicit consent even if the communication was clear and may be more nuanced. Another participant, Chima, similarly conceptualised verbal consent as direct, simple and "straightforward" questioning. He explained that he would sometimes ask his girlfriend for sex directly, such as "Do you want to have sex?".

Participants, when reflecting on the content of the sample videos, used this as an opportunity to evaluate what they would define as explicit consent. Tim, who was at

university with his girlfriend, did not perceive the consent in the videos to be explicit verbal consent unless it contained a direct question and answer. He explained that verbal consent was "where they're saying 'Oh should we do it?'". When asked openly what he thought about the sample videos, he commented that although he felt some videos contained more obvious, direct verbal consent than others "they're all okay...all of them you knew that it was consensual. Another participant, Henry, who did not have any sexual relationship over the study period, when reflecting on the presentation of consent in the sample videos, differentiated between examples of verbal consent which were "very obvious" and those which were "more sexy", pitting these against each other as contrasting ideas. In presenting these as juxtaposing, Henry expressed that consent could either be explicit or enjoyable and thus would not define subtle or playful sexual communication as explicit consent.

Frank commented that when having sex with his long-term partner he "wouldn't specifically state shall we have sex?". He understood this direct questioning as explicit verbal consent but would not practise consent in this way. When reflecting on the sample videos, although they all included a verbal element to be included in the sample set, Frank only identified the videos as examples of verbal consent if it was a direct exchange in this manner. He identified video 4 as not containing an explicit exchange of consent, even though this video contained a direct discussion about consent. As consent in this video was a wider conversation about sex and the desire to engage in sex, rather than a simple question and answer, Frank did not interpret this as explicit verbal consent. However, although he did not perceive these videos as verbal consent, according to his definition, he felt that these videos were "better examples of consent", a "good representation".

Overall, despite defining ideal consent as a direct verbal question and answer following a simplistic affirmative model, the participants largely practised consent via non-verbal, physical signs and signals. This showed an incongruence between how they understand consent as an ideal and how they practise it, which has been found in other studies (Willis et al, 2019; Graf and Johnson, 2021). Physical sexual initiation rather than verbal could be considered socially and psychologically less high risk because it is more tentative and can more gradually determine willingness reducing the risk of outright rejection or embarrassment.

5.3 Sub-theme: Using Physical Consent Communication

To navigate consent via physical signs, the participants described often using body language, consciously looking for signs of arousal and pleasure and sometimes less consciously felt consent as an atmosphere or tone. Although the communication was largely non-verbal, communication was still taking place and could be practised in a way which felt to them, clear and effective. However, physical consent communication carries a risk of miscommunication, potentially leading to unintentional sexual harm (Setty, 2021: 332). This sub-theme was expressed by 10/11 participants.

During their physical consent communication, the participants were more often more aware of specific signs of non-consent, more attuned to signs of refusal, and more consciously looking for any such signs as it would be more concerning to continue an unwanted sex act than stop a wanted one. Thus, they assumed consent from the perceived tone and atmosphere of the experience and the presence of encouraging

body language, until they perceived a sign of refusal. This follows a "no means no" mentality, whereby consent can be assumed from non-verbal signals until direct refusal, now out of favour as a best practice amongst sex educators and policymakers, in favour of affirmative consent practices (Graf and Johnson, 2021: 449; Muehlenhard et al, 2016: 465).

This section explores and explains three key features of the participants' physical consent communication. Firstly, when they were consciously and purposefully interpreting physical communication cues. Secondly, when they were navigating consent less consciously, feeling consent as a tone or atmosphere. Thirdly, how they were more diligent about signals which could potentially signify discomfort or unwillingness to make sure they did not accidentally cross any boundaries. Physical consent communication was utilised prior to any sexual contact to determine potential willingness to engage sexually, then once an experience began, it was also used throughout ongoing sexual activities to ensure ongoing consent.

5.3.1 Consciously Interpreting and Using Physical Signals:

The participants described sometimes consciously noting and acting upon physical signals given out by their partner to understand consent. For example, Tim described that sex was most often initiated non-verbally when he was in bed with his girlfriend; there were "not sort of spoken words, but we both know that's what we want". When having sex with his current non-binary partner, Dylan, looked for non-verbal signs that they were willing and enthusiastic about having sex. He relayed signs such as "scratching my back" or "being more vocal" (moans or sounds of pleasure rather than

conversation), signs on enjoyment which he interpreted as indicating agreement. Although Dylan notes signs of willingness, these are also conflated with signs of desire: "A lot of the time people, like you notice signs that their heart rate is speeding up, that they get a bit nervous, like something, and I like... I guess when people just start to sort of like relax and seem more comfortable". His description featured a juxtaposition between perceived signs of consent, "nervous" as a sign of desire and "relax" as a sign of willingness and comfort and he paused with slight uncertainty when describing the different signs. He also explained that "you can't telepathically just know if someone's having a good time or not", so he did not always have full confidence but he could interpret that they were potentially wanting to have sex and use that as a starting point for further communication.

Frank, although currently in a long-term relationship, explained that physical consent communication has felt easy to navigate across different partners because the tone and positive body language have been consistent. He explained that body language indicating consent would include appearing "quite relaxed", and "seeming as though they're enjoying themselves in the moment". Frank also equated pleasure and enjoyment with consent, and suggests that this is "very, very much explicit"; an obvious and reliable way to gauge consent. He noted signs of desire in his partner's "noises", and "facial expressions", or that a lot of the time "you can tell that a girl is thoroughly enjoying themselves". He also explained that signs of physical arousal such as getting "a bit wetter" or "nipples get harder", are "obvious" signs that the sexual encounter is wanted. Using signs of desire as indicative of consent was mirrored by Zixin, a Chinese international student, who has had girlfriends before but was not in a relationship during the study period. If his sexual partner was "wet", "shaking", or he noticed a

facial expression of pleasure, with closed eyes and open mouth, he would assume that she consented.

However, it could feel difficult for the participants to gauge consent when there are fewer signs in their body language, of pleasure, enjoyment or willingness, which is a limitation of relying on non-verbal consent signals. Some people do not externally show many signs of pleasure, they may be quite quiet and not moan or talk, even if they are enjoying the experience. John reflected that with his previous girlfriend: "Although I think she was enjoying it, was kind of harder to see like she wasn't getting off the same, even, like I said, facial expressions or moans or....". Whilst he thought she was consenting, there was some uncertainty due to a lack of obvious signs of pleasure. He explained that there was "less sort of feedback in any way from her", which suggests that he wanted her to actively use non-verbal signals to reassure him of her willingness.

As well as interpreting their partner's physical signals, the participants described how they would actively perform signals to indicate their desires to their partner. Eric, who did not have a partner at the time of the study but reflected on previous experiences, explained that if he wanted to receive a sex act, he would communicate this desire non-verbally, through an action. "So, say the girl started to touch my penis, I probably, say I wanted a blowjob, I'd probably like to touch their face and touch their face and just kind of, I don't know, very gently push in a certain direction, which feels very odd saying that out loud. But if say just wants to have sex, I'd probably just hold onto their waist or something like that instead and kind of pull them closer" (Eric). In this case,

he would not suggest an act until she had already started touching him, which he interprets as a willingness to perform a sex act involving his penis, such as oral sex. He would then non-verbally perform an action to indicate the sex act he wanted to receive, based on an assumed shared understanding that the act of a head push, is a non-verbal way of asking for oral sex. As he described the experience, he reflected that the process "feels very odd" to say "out loud". The interview provided the space for him to make new realisations about his consent practice and to reflect on the effectiveness of his strategies.

5.3.2 Unconsciously Feeling Consent as An Atmosphere:

Often the participants' process of interpreting physical signals in their partners or suggesting sex acts non-verbally felt less conscious. One of the participants, Frank, when reflecting on experiences with his long-term partner, noted that consent was largely felt as an atmosphere. He explained that "you don't really think about it too much", "you" suggesting that from his perspective, this is a universal experience of consent. John similarly reflected that he did not consciously think about consent because "you can just tell". He felt that anyone, universally, could understand consent from physical feelings.

Chris also discussed sensing consent. Chris was in a long-term relationship for eight years which ended before his participation in the study and he reflected on his experiences in this relationship. "There's just a look that you can just see and see in their eyes. Just kind of like, yeah, I'm up for this, yeah, carry on kind of thing" (Chris). He vaguely described a "look" indicating willingness and consent, which "you can just

see". With "you" and "their", he universalised his statement, portraying a belief that this look is commonly exhibited and understood. Although Chris could not describe exactly what the look is, he was confident in what it communicates. Chris also felt that it would be clear from non-verbal signals if sex was unwanted. He "could see immediately" if she was "not feeling this" and would "back off", and so he would not require non-consent to be communicated verbally. He expressed that it should not be necessary to be refused directly and he should be able to sense that he should stop.

In settings involving drinking, the participants noted that their initial contact with someone might indicate their willingness to engage in casual sex, and this would be most notably felt as an atmosphere. Henry explained: "I guess the times that I've sort of, it's been like the start or something, or something like that, I've been probably a bit drunk and we just sort of, just sort of clambered in, sort of under assumption that we both want it to happen. Less verbal, definitely, in that way". He repeated "we", to express that from his perspective there was equal willingness between them. He was also aware that assumptions guided the experience, but from his perspective, this was not an issue as they both assumed correctly and wanted the experience. In these early flirtations, Henry was assessing potential willingness for sex to happen soon.

In addition, Tim described his first few sexual experiences with his girlfriend with little clarity because they were "both very drunk for most of it". His use of "both" emphasises that from his perspective they were equally intoxicated, of a similar mental state, and thus equally able to consent. He described what happened during those first few hook-ups: "I feel like it was probably just like obviously stumbling into the bedroom, very

drunk and probably just kissing. And we were probably a lot more, it was a probably a lot faster because we were drunk. So yeah, I imagine it was just sort of like jump onto the bed, keep kissing, and then clothes off and then down to it". His repetition of "probably" and use of "imagine" conveyed that this was an account of his usual practice, rather than a specific example. He could not remember exactly how consent was negotiated and instead explained what would have physically occurred between them as the preamble to getting "down to it". His repetition of "we" showed that this experience was in his opinion, equal and reciprocal, with them both showing the same physical signs of consent. His asyndetic list of activities and vague description of sex as "down to it", give the impression that these events happened in quick succession, without much conscious thought or that he was not comfortable retelling the events in detail at the interview.

Another participant, Owen, who did not have a partner but engaged in casual sex, meeting women in bars and clubs, echoed that non-verbal signals could be unconsciously used and felt when flirting or gauging interest, as a precursor to gauging consent to sex. Owen discussed feeling an atmosphere of willingness, which might indicate sexual or romantic interest, before thinking about sex, noting if they "connect", "get on" or feel "physical chemistry". During an initial experience, culminating hints and suggestions reassured Owen of the other person's willingness and sexual interest. After noting the atmosphere during an initial period of flirting, if the other person agreed to them going home together, Owen would assume that this indicates potentially wanting to have sex. Thus, this communication was about the potential for future sexual activity. This was a pattern which Owen had learnt from "experience" with different sexual partners and so he understood it as a reliable sign of willingness. "If

she does want to come back, then from my experience, that usually means it's going to like become more and then yeah usually it kind of just happens naturally from there" (Owen). This example also highlights how communication might function uniquely in a drinking or party context when there are certain patterns of behaviour, such as flirting in a club and agreeing to go home together are socially expected, and so can be used to ask for sex.

Similarly, Owen felt refusal or unwillingness as an atmosphere also. He shared an example of when he went out with a girl who did not feel interested and he increasingly felt her disinterest as they spent time together. He explained that "there wasn't really a kind of connection I guess, because she was kind of withdrawn from it". This made Owen feel "awkward", thus, sensing her feelings, prompted him to feel uneasy. Owen struggled to describe this atmosphere as it is something which is felt, repeating uncertain qualifiers; "kind of", "I guess". Following the experience Owen explained: "Well then I just stopped talking to her because it just felt like confusing and a bit, it just didn't feel right." After perceiving her disinterest, Owen disengaged, communicating that he understood her boundaries without the use of words. He understood that although he had previously felt the potential for sexual willingness, it was then communicated to him that this would not be wanted so he withdrew from the situation and did not pursue further.

5.3.3 Being More Vigilant About Signs of Refusal:

The participants sometimes consciously noted and sometimes less consciously felt, physical signals of consent. However, they were more attuned to signs of refusal than

signs of acceptance and were more vigilant about noticing and appropriately acting on these signs. The idea that they might miss physical signs of refusal caused the participants a lot of worry and anxiety because they did not want to cause harm, but did not encourage them to use more verbal techniques. At the interview, when reflecting on body language, Frank gave more specific signs of non-consent, indicating that he was more attuned to signs of refusal. Signs of non-consent might include appearing "closed off", "being quite silent", "looking a bit tense" or "uninterested". Paying great attention to signs of refusal could be a useful tool, to ensure that activities are stopped at the first sign of discomfort or unwillingness.

Eric shared the signs of refusal he might have seen in his ex-girlfriend. He noted that he might feel "hesitancy", repeating and emphasising this as a key sign, or "resistance". Additionally, he gave more specific examples of purposeful non-verbal signs of refusal, such as closing legs, "pulling away", "stiffness", going "dead quiet", or stopping his hands "to stop them from going any further". However, throughout Eric's relationship with his ex-girlfriend, unclear consent would regularly cause distress for the couple. The issue was not directly discussed between them, so Eric was confused, anxious and unsure what to do: "Some of the time, maybe every one in 40 times we had sex, I don't really know why, but she'd get very overwhelmed and kind of freak out. And then obviously we'd stop having sex and then she'd start crying". He explained that he would "obviously" stop, but did not understand why it happened or how to prevent it. He repeated "I don't really know why", "I've never really known why", "I don't know why", indicating his continued confusion and uncertainty about the issue. He would suggest a different activity such as "TV" or "a walk" but would not communicate about what happened to prevent it from happening again. He believed

that as he did not initiate sex often, but this happened about "50% of the time" when he initiated, that there was "a correlation between me initiating a like a higher chance of that happening". By stating the link as a "correlation", he showed concern that it might be something he was doing but was unsure and uncomfortable discussing it further with the researcher, potentially due to anxiety about wanting to respond desirably in the interview setting.

When it came to flirting rather than initiating sex, Henry learnt from experience that "people don't seem to have very much patience for sort of hanging around me if they're not interested". Therefore, he felt like he could correctly assume that someone will refuse if they are not interested in him, so if they do not clearly refuse he can assume his actions are wanted. Although he noticed and respected refusals, or noninterest, this method places responsibility on the other person to make it clear that they are not interested. "I think I just sort of assume if they don't want me to be there, they'd tell me to bugger off or look uncomfortable, you know" (Henry). He felt that he could usually sense if someone was sexually interested in him, via their continued presence in his company and interest in conversation. He was most attuned to signs of refusal and listed signals such as "not making much eye contact", being "quiet" and keeping a physical distance, avoiding touch. He wanted to be perceptive and feel like he was practising good consent strategies, and correctly understanding when a woman was interested in him or not but expresses that this can be "difficult".

Chima was more attuned to signs of refusal than signs of willingness and could give specific examples of acts which would indicate refusal but he could not give examples of signs of willingness. He gave an example: "See if they try to stop my hands, if they

don't, then I start undressing them". This focus on refusal caused him issues during an experience whereby the girl he was with did not seem engaged but also did not refuse him or ask him to stop. Chima differentiated between a lack of engagement and being "dismissive", in his understanding of consent, there was a difference between a partner not clearly consenting, or displaying passivity, and clearly refusing sex. When describing the event, his speech became muddled and awkward, showing his discomfort and worry: "I wasn't necessarily sure she necessarily enjoyed it". He repeated the adverb, "necessarily", to soften his sentence, avoiding saying directly that consent was unclear. He explained that he: "just wasn't really getting any cues to be honest", so he struggled to understand her discomfort in the absence of a clear refusal. He explained that they had sex before and after this experience, and although this time felt wrong, he could not explain why exactly, "that particular time it was quite..." trailing off before finishing the sentence indicating his lack of clarity. Therefore, prioritising looking for signs of refusal over signs of willingness caused him issues in this instance. Chima described feeling guilty and conflicted about the experience, because according to his understanding of consent, it was consensual because she did not refuse, but he felt something was not right. Chima "felt quite worried" that he had "taken advantage", and he continued to think about it for a "few days". He did not feel compelled to check in or stop in the moment, but did feel guilty and anxious afterwards, "it kept racking in my mind", and checked in with her after the experience to confirm she was ok.

If signs of refusal are valued more highly than signs of acceptance, or consent is defined as the absence of a firm refusal, this can cause issues. Zixin was one participant who understood consent as the absence of a firm and obvious refusal. He

believed that it was important for him to ask his sexual partners for consent, but either did not expect a response, or often understood a "no" as a playful refusal, and would continue to ask, potentially adding pressure. He confidently explained: "So if I ask, she doesn't refuse me, it means consent. She doesn't, like, afraid of sex, it means consent". Although the language barrier may hinder interpretation, the researcher understood his perspective as interpreting passivity or a lack of resistance or discomfort as consent. However, Zixin's experiences also included token resistance (Shafer et al, 2018: 48). He noted that often women will playfully refuse his initiation initially, but if he asked again, they will remain silent which he interprets as: "I know she wants it". He also used tone to understand his partner's verbal communications. If she playfully or half-heartedly refused, "she's just like er no", he understood this as token refusal. However, if a woman seriously told him to "stop it" or "slap" him away, he would stop immediately. Tone rather than the content of communication was a larger factor in Zixin's understanding of consent. Therefore, in prioritising signs of firm refusal to gauge consent and only being vigilant about these, Zixin may miss or misunderstand other signals indicating discomfort or unwillingness.

5.4 Sub-theme: Initiating and Reciprocating

The stages of sex, according to a typical heterosexual script and as described by the participants are progressive, building in intimacy, and directional, culminating in intercourse, which is usually the step defined as 'sex'. This is also how the participants described sex. This heterosexual script is a "cultural scenario", so it functions on a wider cultural level and influences or inspires behaviour (Simon and Gagnon, 2002). Lower stages which are deemed less intimate are termed 'lower order' and higher stages which are deemed more intimate are termed 'higher order' (Willis et al,

2020:53). The diagram below depicts a normative depiction of the stages of heterosexual experiences, as described in the participants' narratives. Of course, sex does not need to follow this structure, however, this is a stereotypical understanding.

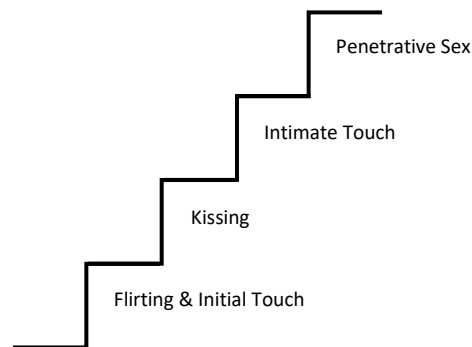


Figure 4: An image representing the stages of sex as described by the study participants

This sub-theme describes how the participants understood sex as a series of stages, increasing in intimacy like the metaphorical staircase presented in the diagram and would use those stages to navigate consent using largely physical consent communication. The participants would initiate sex mostly physically and tentatively. They used the lowest order acts, such as maintaining eye contact, a smile, a kiss or a small touch, to hint that sex is wanted. If their partner seemed comfortable with that, they would gradually introduce higher-order acts, such as more intimate touching, then manual or oral sex, and then penetrative activities, escalating the activity step by step. At each stage, they looked for non-verbal signs of acceptance, or even better, signs of reciprocation in their partner, which was taken as consent to the current stage and consent to initiate the next stage. It was assumed that their partner knew what to expect next and would not be surprised as the stages of sex following a typical heterosexual script are widely understood (Simon and Gagnon, 2002). This sub-theme was expressed by all the participants.

5.4.1 Sex as A Series of Stages:

Sex does not always follow a set routine from lower to higher-order acts, however, the participants in this study did conceptualise sex as a series of escalating acts which make up an evolving experience. For example, John described the series of escalating actions during sex as part of a "natural flow". For him, the normative script of progressive sex, culminating in penetration defined as "sex", is an innate part of his sexual experiences. He explained: "started kissing in bed and more touching and then, just well, one thing leads to another, touching intimately and yeah, then having sex after that". As "one thing leads to another", he was not consciously thinking about obtaining explicit consent at each stage, instead, agreement to engage in one stage, felt like it "flows" into agreement to the next, as the sexual experience progresses. "Just like we start kissing and touching, foreplay and so on. It just sort of flows", "and so on" assumes that the interviewer also understands the normative progressive routine of heterosexual sex. Zixin also described his sexual encounters as a series of escalating acts. He would "kiss her body", "do oral sex" and then "do sex with her"; here Zixin defined "sex" as vaginal penetration. He listed the acts in quick succession, without much thought, suggesting this is a usual routine.

5.4.2 Initiating with The Lowest Order Acts:

The participants described using the lowest order acts to initiate a sexual experience before gradually introducing further acts understanding sex as an escalating experience and using this to re-negotiate consent as it developed. Sexual experiences were conceptualised by the participants as unidirectional, increasing in intimacy as the encounter progressed. Sex does not have to follow this set path, but for the participants it mostly did. Following the set path helped them to more easily navigate

consent because they had an assumed shared understanding with their partner about what might come next in the experience; and what further acts they might consent to.

Ellis explained that moving slowly between progressive steps was important as it ensured that consent could be checked in on throughout. They described that they "moved up all the stages one by one", to determine continued comfort. "Manual then oral, and it kind of would follow that progressive order...you can gauge steps cause you don't jump your gun too quickly... whether they're egging on in the sense of a nod or a smile or a yes" (Ellis).

Kissing was a common opening act. Frank would initiate sex with his partner with an initial kiss, likely once they were already in bed, as the location also served as a hint for sex. He qualified his explanation with "I suppose" and "probably" conveying a routine which is likely to follow the same pattern, rather than a specific incident. When asked at the interview about a specific example he described a scenario which happened the previous weekend: "We got back into our flat, we got into bed, we just sort of cuddled for a bit and then tried to kiss her. She was very receptive of that and was kissing me back. I then probably, I think I fingered her a bit". Frank listed a series of culminating acts, utilising reciprocation as a sign of his partner's consent. He firstly initiated a lower order act, "kissing", which she was "receptive" to and reciprocated. Frank took this as consent to the current act and permission to try the next stage. Thus, in response to her reciprocation, he then initiated manual sex. Similarly, John's first few stages of initiation with his girlfriend were tentative and small. He might "get close to her", snuggle up to her in bed, "hug her", and then "kissing would be the next

thing probably". "Probably" indicates that this was a description of a usual or expected routine rather than a specific example. From their responses to these initial lower-order acts, such as "relaxed body language" or signs of arousal such as "breathing heavier", John and his partner would determine if further, higher-order acts were desired.

When initiating sex with his girlfriend, Tim would "start just obviously a kiss or a feel, something like that", using a lower-order act to gauge his partner's willingness to have sex. He would start in "bed", which in itself was a hint that sex may happen, as this location is commonly associated with sex, which then leads to "making out", and after that, he described that "things moved on", they would "feel around", he'd touch her "breasts", "her grabbing me", "taking clothes off", "foreplay building up". Tim set out this list of typical, escalating sexual acts as "standard". In Tim's diary entries, his communication strategies were consistent over the six weeks. Tim and his partner used consistent opening moves, which are understood and hints for sex, such as being in bed, cuddling and neck kisses. So, through a combination of these hints, they could non-verbally ask for and give consent in a way which felt mutually effective from Tim's perspective.

"If it was me initiating the way I'd sort of realise that she was wanting it back would be her like, physical actions in response. So say, I'd say I gave her a kiss. It would be her coming onto me again and kissing me back" (Tim).

He gave exact examples of different types of reciprocation, how he would initiate and how she would non-verbally respond to show acceptance. Thus, he understood the nuance of her specific non-verbal signalling. He also described that he would most

often initiate by touching her body, whilst she would kiss him and wait for his response. He noted that "she likes to let me respond to what she's... giving", thus, he has noted that his partner will consciously wait for his reciprocation as a sign that he is willing to continue the activities. In the diary entries, when prompted to describe signs of willingness, Tim frequently recorded that they said, "I love you". Although he clarified in the interview that they do not say purposefully just to establish consent, they take these words as a sign of continued enjoyment and willingness, so they become part of the ongoing consent communication.

Owen would also initiate casual sexual experiences using lower-order acts, mostly kissing, and described gradually progressing and escalating the intimacy. "Probably start off with kissing and then we might get a bit handsy and it kind of, it like gradually progresses from there" (Owen). Owen listed the sexual acts he would engage in, without any note of direct communication between each stage, suggesting that each seemed to flow into the next, without conscious thought. An initial kiss might happen "naturally", without thought, and this was viewed as acceptable for these lowest-order acts. He explained that he would not initiate anything "too kind of advanced straight away", "advanced" was used to refer to higher-order acts, so he noted it would be inappropriate to try to initiate or ask for anything higher order, maintaining a progressive view of sexual experiences. The use of hints and suggestions was built on an assumed shared understanding, as Owen might undress slightly as a hint and he felt that his sexual partner would "understand where it's going", thus initiating step by step, relied on the assumption that both parties knew what those steps were.

The initial suggestions could also be playful. Chima explained that he might ask to "wrestle", and that initial playful physical touch would then "lead into it". "Lead into it" suggests that once initial contact has been made, sexual contact, and higher order acts, seem to flow easily. The lowest-order acts could also take place outside of the home. Chris notes that they might be "dancing together" on a date, which may indicate that sex might be wanted when they return home together. He then remarked "Things would just sort of like escalate from there I suppose", his use of "escalate" reflects a progressive view of sex as a series of culminating actions.

For some, the lowest order acts did not involve any physical contact, such as flirting or eye contact. These early flirtations would be used to communicate and interpret that sex might be wanted in the near future, then, if they did have sex, they would engage in ongoing communication as the experience progressed to ensure ongoing consent. Henry explained that he might look out for an initial hint such as "physical proximity if they choose to move close", "choose" suggests agency, so if someone selects to do this, for Henry, they are more likely to be consciously indicating their sexual interest. He may also use subtle hints to show his sexual interest, with a suggestive comment or a lower-order act such as a hand on the leg. These hints were used to indicate interest without doing too much too soon. Going too far, if unwanted, could be more embarrassing for him and uncomfortable for them. He explained that he would start with: "some kind of physical contact, which isn't disgusting and overly explicit, but sort of you know, suggests something". "Disgusting" is an emotive, loaded word. To Henry, opening with anything more direct would not just be undesirable, it would be repulsive. Maintaining a progressive order to sex and increasing in intimacy was woven into his

values. As the move would "suggest something", Henry assumed that his partner would also understand the meaning of the hint.

5.4.3 Consciously Looking for Signs of Consent in The Liminal Spaces Between Stages:

The participants often less consciously navigated consent using physical communication throughout sexual experiences. However, they most consciously looked for signs of consent in the liminal spaces between stages. They described how they would initiate using a physical suggestion, then look for signs of acceptance, or better, reciprocation, as an indication of their partner's consent to move on to the next stage in the sexual experience. This ensured ongoing and specific consent as sexual experiences developed. For example, Frank's narratives described consciously following a pattern of initiation and watching for a "positive reaction" or reciprocation, with his partner. Using this at each stage to tentatively ensure ongoing permission, before initiating "further".

Owen also described using the spaces between each "step" to look for both reassuring body language and reciprocation from his casual partners. "So from just the kissing then the getting a bit handsy. So it would be during every step and in between every step... body language and like if she was really kind of participating" (Owen). He explained a scenario where the other person was not clearly reciprocating when he initiated or hinted at sexual acts, which he understood as a clear sign of non-consent. He also purposefully showed positive body language and reciprocated acts, to show his consent. However, he also reflected on the difficulties of relying on body language or reciprocation as consent in the interview. This was a new thought as he paused,

before thinking out loud with "actually". He explained that sometimes the other person's face might not be visible, so their expression could not be seen. He also expressed a belief that some people might feel pressure to reciprocate or may only initiate a sex act in the hope that it is reciprocated. He had heard that if a woman gives a man oral sex, he is expected to return the favour, and thus believes that women sometimes only give oral sex to get it in return. This made him think that women do not enjoy giving oral sex in its own right. Thus, he wondered if reciprocation does not always mean that a sex act is wanted, because someone may feel pressure to reciprocate, or may perform an unwanted sex act, to have it reciprocated.

After initiation, reciprocation was used as a key way of determining consent by the participants. If someone was "responsive and reactive", reciprocating the current act or stage of sex, Dylan noted this behaviour as indicative of consent. He started his point with "I find", suggesting that he had learnt this from experience. However, if someone did not reciprocate, this was taken as a sign of non-consent. If low-order behaviours were rejected, Dylan understood this as a sign that sex was unwanted and would not initiate further. For example, if they "don't hold eye contact", "don't return physical touch", or physically distance themselves, "if someone scoots over" away from him.

Chima had also learnt that reciprocation was often used by his partner as a specific sign that consent was given to that stage of sex, such as touching his head when he gave oral sex as a physical sign of encouragement, and a lack of reciprocation or avoidance was used as a sign of non-consent, such as if the "person moves away". When talking about signs of reciprocation, he switched from using the pronoun "she",

which he used throughout to refer to his current girlfriend specifically, to the more universal "they", suggesting that these signs feel true generally.

Tim looked for reciprocation in his girlfriend at each stage to ensure that she was consenting to the activity. He noted that she might "respond in a very similar way" or "just bounces off what I'm sort of doing", thus, he leads encounters, whilst her reciprocation shows her consent. He looked for reciprocation of both the sex act and style, so they may mirror rougher or gentler sex, for example, to show willingness to have sex in that manner. He noted that sometimes non-verbal signals would be unclear, so he would try something else, touch a "different place on the body", then if she "doesn't follow up with anything" or "pulls away" he would take that as non-consent. Thus, a lack of reciprocation and hesitant body language indicated to him a lack of consent and that he should stop.

Chris would also use his ex-partner's reciprocation as the "main" indication of consent. If they "touch you back straight away, then that's like a great sign", whereas if he was not "getting the same thing back", this would indicate discomfort or non-consent. The speed of reciprocation, how closely the reciprocation mirrored the initiated act and the enthusiasm in reciprocation, were all used to gauge consent. He also explained that he would use reciprocation to consciously show his consent. He noted that if he was asked for sex verbally, he would answer verbally, however, if it was a non-verbal initiation, he would also show his consent through reciprocation of the act, style and energy, "by matching kind of what they're doing". Henry would also use reciprocation to show previous partners that he consented. If someone moved to kiss him, he would

adjust his body language to show interest and then mirror their kiss. He noted that he would look "vaguely interested", so his body language was more passive and his consent was more conveyed through his reciprocation of the act.

Ellis' narratives depicted consciously initiating sex step by step and directly checking in for comfort to ensure consent was continuously given as sexual experiences evolve. Although they followed the same steps as other participants reported, they did not assume that comfort with one stage could be taken as consent to initiate the next. Instead, they used the moment between stages as a time to check in for consent explicitly and consciously, either looking for signals or asking verbally if signals were unclear. They laid out in detail, showing a lot of conscious thought and attention, the stages they would undertake with a new, casual sexual partner. They reported diligently checking in or asking verbally at each stage, from an initial kiss on a night out to agreeing to go home together to initial touches, "foreplay" and penetrative sex.

They also explained that they would note signs of discomfort or non-consent as a sex act is approached. For example, if they want to give oral sex, they will work their way down the body slowly, "going through those stages" to understand "what their comfort line is", and how far they are happy to progress. If they noted signs of discomfort as they approached giving oral sex, such as being "tense", "uncomfortable" or closing their legs, they would stop. Similarly, Ellis would purposefully reciprocate actions to show that they consent: "by matching what they do... Quickly after...I would quickly do the same thing in a, well, I would count as an equal, equally intimate area". This purposeful reciprocation follows actions taken by other participants, but the researcher

interpreted that Ellis conducts this with self-awareness, purposefully showing willingness and reciprocation to reassure their partners of their consent. When their sexual partner reciprocates, by mirroring to show consent, Ellis accepted that stage on the sexual journey but waited for their partner to progress to the next stage.

5.5 Sub-theme: Asking for Reassurance

The sub-themes thus far have described how the participants largely use physical communication to signal asking for, giving and refusing consent. In addition, their physical consent communication tends to follow a pattern of initiation and reciprocation as they progress through stages of lower and higher-order sex acts. Sometimes verbal consent communication was used alongside physical communication; however, this would usually follow the use of physical communication. This sub-theme was expressed by eight of the 11 participants.

They would mostly use physical cues for lower-order acts, working their way through their progressive stages of sex, step by step. After progressing through a few stages and becoming increasingly intimate, the participants became more certain that higher-order acts might be wanted. They then only asked for consent verbally at this point, when they had gleaned from non-verbal signals of acceptance, or the reciprocation of lower order acts, that higher order acts were likely wanted. In other words, they were asking for reassurance that the 'yes' they had assumed from physical signals was correct. This sub-theme explores this idea and how it has been expressed in the participants' data. This sub-theme also explores how alternatively, if after a series of physical communication, the participants were unsure of their partner's consent, or felt

they were getting some signs of discomfort, they might ask directly before moving on to higher-order acts. This allowed them to clarify any uncertainty about consent and give their partner an opportunity to refuse.

5.5.1 Asking to Confirm Consent After Physical Communication:

Some participants explained that it would be embarrassing to ask for consent verbally unless they had already received physical consent for lower-order acts. Frank explained that he might feel "awkward" to ask his partner for consent directly before any contact happens, however, once they are "in the moment" after a few lower order stages have been passed, he would feel more "comfortable" to directly ask for sex acts.

Another participant, Henry, explained that with previous partners he might utilise verbal consent and ask for sex directly. However, he would also only do so after initial contact had been made. "We'd probably just be like in a bed already and probably just start making out or something, and then one of us would go, "do you want to have sex?" (Henry). He repeated "probably", indicating that this would be his usual behaviour, rather than a specific example. Before asking verbally, sex was hinted at through being close together in bed, and "making out". He then would feel comfortable asking for sex directly, after those initial stages have been progressed through. He explained: "I just sort of ask if I'm getting signs, I think. Yeah". Thus, he would only ask directly, when he already has some confidence that the answer will be yes because they have engaged in some lower-order behaviours together and he is receiving non-verbal signals of willingness. "Instead of like sort of outright saying anything like you

know, "do you want to have sex?" like early on, I'd just sort of compliment them and make it clear that I'm interested in them" (Henry). Thus, if he were to use verbal consent, he would utilise hints and gauge their willingness before asking for consent directly.

Similarly, Dylan, who had been with his partner for a little over a year, described how he would wait until he was sure that they wanted to have sex before initiating sex or asking for consent more directly. "I always found it more comfortable to wait until the other person was giving me semi-clear or some indication that they wanted to have sex as well" (Dylan). He expressed that this was "more comfortable", potentially due to embarrassment or shame about asking for consent when sex might not be wanted. He would want the non-verbal signals to be "semi-clear" and thus would only ask to confirm his assumption that sex is wanted. He explained that he would want a "fair bit of lead up" and to make sure that what he was doing was being "reciprocated" before initiating higher-order sexual behaviours. In describing a lead-up and reciprocation, he suggested that he would want some lower-order behaviours to be performed and reciprocated before suggesting higher-order behaviours. He explained that a lot of people often feel a "barrier to physical contact", which when broken, when these lower order stages have been completed, there is a higher chance that they are interested in sex. He also argued that it was more important to move through lower-order behaviours more slowly if the other person was less sexually experienced, so they do not feel pressured or rushed to agree to higher-order behaviours. He explained that this had been learnt from experience because his first boyfriend made him feel rushed and therefore pressured, to move quickly into higher-order behaviours. He expressed that slowly moving through lower-order behaviours gives people more time to think

about how far they are happy to go and what they want to consent to. However, he rambled through this, often repeating himself, suggesting that he was not sure how to phrase this point or felt uncomfortable.

Dylan also explained that sometimes asking for consent directly can be high risk, so it is better to gauge consent non-verbally first, and then just use verbal consent to confirm. "If there's someone who you haven't had sex with before, who you're just friends with, I guess like it would, it's like potentially, like maybe damaging to the friendship... to say, like do you want to have sex? Cause if they don't want to... I can definitely understand that it'd be difficult to just go back to like complete normalcy after someone asks you to have sex with them" (Dylan). The act of asking for consent may ruin a friendship or make people feel uncomfortable if they do not want sex, so the relationship between those potentially having sex impacted how consent was communicated. He could "definitely understand" that this may be an issue, and thus conveys his confidence in this point.

Tim explained that there are some times when he might ask his partner for sex directly, however, this was unusual. More often, he would start a sexual experience with an action and might potentially ask later. "I'd say there are times where we sort of just are doing nothing. We just sort of look at each other and go do you wanna have sex?...it's mainly, it's sort of just like an action that would start things off" (Tim). He used "we" to express that verbal consent was experienced as mutual. When sex was requested directly, even if it occurred prior to any contact, it would be in a quiet moment when

they were not distracted by other tasks and sex could, logistically, happen. Yet, he noted that most of the time an action would "start things off".

Ellis would often use verbal or direct consent to ask for penetrative sex, but they would not necessarily do so for lower-order behaviours. "I'd say nearly always the actual sex step from the foreplay step is verbal because there's always a condom involved. And if it's not verbal, it's always very obviously getting the condom out, showing it and waiting for some form of facial reaction" (Ellis). They defined sex as penetration and differentiated other sex acts as "foreplay", for which non-verbal signals were acceptable.

5.5.2 Asking When Physical Communication Is Unclear:

Participants would use more verbal consent strategies if they were unsure of their partner's consent via physical signals. For example, Ellis would more often utilise verbal consent if it was their first time with a new partner or if the person they were with was less sexually experienced, as they want to be more cautious. They described an example where they were having sex with someone who had not had sex before (which they previously defined as penetration). They were much slower and more tentative but still followed the same routine of having sex slowly, step by step, gradually incorporating higher order behaviours, before asking for consent for penetration directly through discussing getting a condom. Although they followed the same pattern, as it was her first time, Ellis "initiated not a single action", and instead let her take the lead in suggesting each stage. They reiterated that they were particularly

cautious, which led the girl to become increasingly sexually frustrated and aroused, which emphasised her willingness.

In contrast to Ellis who showed a preference for verbal consent communication, Owen would rarely use verbal consent, although they were both mostly engaging in casual sex. He explained that it might be easier to understand consent non-verbally for "just kissing and hand stuff and less advanced stuff". Thus, he echoed sentiments that consent can be easily navigated non-verbally for lower-order behaviours. His use of "advanced" similarly suggested an assumed order to sex, that behaviours have increasing intimacy, following a typical script for the stages of sex. Whereas other participants suggested that for lower order behaviours they might rely on signals of acceptance or reciprocation, but may sometimes ask verbally for higher order behaviours, Owen would not ask verbally. Instead, to gauge consent for higher-order acts, he would continue to "gradually escalate it and obviously make sure it's comfortable", continuing to use a pattern of initiation and reciprocation to navigate higher-order acts. He would move between stages "gradually", moving slowly and tentatively to ensure continued comfort and consent. However, Owen would check in verbally if he received signals that his partner was uncomfortable. He would "definitely say", "is this alright?". He wanted to be sure of consent when signals were unclear and give his partners the opportunity to refuse if they were uncomfortable.

5.6 Sub-theme: Making Gendered Assumptions

The physical consent communication strategies adopted by the participants were mediated by gender roles, stereotypes, and assumptions about how different genders

should behave (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013; Willis et al, 2019). This sub-theme was present in the data of eight of the 11 participants. The belief that men are active during heterosexual sex and thus consent practice (asking for consent and suggesting the sex acts even if this is done so non-verbally) whilst women are passive (with the role of accepting or rejecting advances) was present in the participants' accounts and has been found in previous research (Willis et al, 2020:53). The previous sections of this superordinate theme chapter have explored how the participants understand themselves as initiators and the one to take responsibility for consent. In their narratives, the participants would show their consent actively by performing, initiating or suggesting sex acts, whilst they described their partners as showing consent more passively, via showing comfort with or acceptance of the suggested act. Affirmative consent policies which teach that consent cannot be given passively, are difficult to follow when gender roles lead women to largely communicate agreement passively (Willis et al, 2019: 60).

The gender stereotype that men want sex all the time also had a pervasive impact (Shumlich & Fisher, 2020; Kaestle, 2009; Setty, 2023). The participants were aware of not placing any pressure on their partners to have sex and aware that women may feel pressure to perform or fake enjoyment to please men. However, some also felt that due to this stereotype their consent was not deemed as important as their female partners' and their female partners assumed their consent without asking. They also shared experiences of women reacting badly when sex was refused which led them to accept unwanted sex. The participants' experiences showcased that when consent is understood as unidirectional it can harm women (who are encouraged to use potentially misunderstood passive signals) and men (whose consent is assumed)

during heterosexual experiences. The researcher argues that potentially these issues could be aided if consent is conceptualised as a mutual communication regardless of the individual's gender.

The participants' data which demonstrates this sub-theme is presented below as it relates to two key ideas. The binary roles of men as active and thus initiating sex and asking for consent, and women as passive, accepting sex and giving consent, and how these norms are (re)produced in the participants' sexual experiences with women. Secondly, how the assumption that young men are always interested in sex has impacted the participants' experiences of consent.

5.6.1 Active/Passive, Initiation/Acceptance Gender Binary:

Consent was understood by the participants as something asked by men (and of women) in heterosexual experiences even if this communication was mostly physical. This acted as an extension of the gender norm that men are more active during sex and women more passive. The typical gender roles of men as initiators and women as gatekeepers, are explored in previous research (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013). Zixin explained that when he has a girlfriend, "more than 90%" of the time, he initiates, and it would "just be odd times" that she initiates sex with him. However, the few times a woman has suggested sex he was comfortable responding verbally to her suggestion. Zixin also expressed that sometimes gendered pressures made navigating consent, particularly through non-verbal cues, difficult. He explained that sometimes "girls pretend to scream when they have sex, just wanting to make me happy"; they will fake sounds of pleasure during sex. Potentially, the women he has encountered exaggerate

the accepted passive signals for women to use to indicate consent to purposefully reassure men of their consent. However, he had learnt this gendered pressure and thus noted that he could not rely on the sounds a girl is making as indicative of pleasure or willingness. Instead, he preferred to use signs of desire and pleasure as signs of consent, looking for signs such as "twitching" which are less likely to be a performance.

Whilst the participants described their female partners using physical signals to show they accept male advances and thus consent, the participants themselves understood their consent as determined from actively performing sex acts or suggesting sex acts. If they ask for consent the implication is that they also consent. One participant, Tim, described performing sex acts actively to consciously communicate his consent to his girlfriend. Throughout his diary entries, when prompted to explain how he showed his consent to his partner, Tim described sexual acts and thus he showed his consent by actively taking part in the experience. For example, he explained that acts such as "took my clothes off", "eating her out" and "fingering her" showed his consent as he actively participated. If Tim did not want to have sex, he would feel comfortable to "just say it" and would directly and verbally communicate his non-consent.

In contrast, Tim explained that his girlfriend would use more passive consent strategies and would not verbally refuse; instead, she would push him away or move his hand. Eric also shared these experiences of female partners who would use more indirect communication. Eric noted that from his "experience", repeating this term as the key way he has learnt, women will generally be "more comfortable showing physical disapproval over verbal". He explained that they might sometimes refuse

verbally, but they will firstly refuse non-verbally, before reinforcing verbally. The early signs of refusal may be "moving away", hesitation and a lack of reciprocation.

Ellis identifies as gender-fluid, however, they explained that because they are socially perceived as male, they are treated according to male gender stereotypes and feel the pressures of male gender roles when they have casual sex with women. As with other participants in the study, Ellis would actively and verbally communicate non-consent, saying something like "I'm not overly in the mood right now" and slightly disparagingly explains that to do otherwise might be "playing a game", and unfairly confusing. They expressed that they have previously felt worried that women may feel pressure to have sex so with a previous girlfriend they avoided talking about sex and waited for her to make the "first move" before they had sex for the first time, to avoid accidentally adding any pressure. Their lack of clarity was intended to avoid pressure but it may also hinder consent communication highlighting the challenges of navigating consent in complex contexts. They were also aware that women may fake pleasure, to perform and please their partner. Therefore, when Ellis was looking for non-verbal signs of enjoyment, they would note things such as "body vibrating in non-sexy ways", which are less likely to be faked. They explain that women might "put a show on" "to look good". Although they are concerned about women feeling pressure and want to avoid this, showing an awareness of gender roles and their impact, they also seemed preoccupied with the concept of virginity. They emphasised how many virginites they had "taken" and explained they would be more careful with virgins, ensuring they definitely wanted to have sex. This seems an incongruence, on one hand being aware of gender norms and thinking critically about the impact of these, on the other, upholding notions that

virginity is something precious which should only be lost with care, or assuming that careful consent is not as important if a person is more sexually active.

5.6.2 Assumptions That Boys Always Want Sex:

As shown in other participants' accounts, Frank showed his consent through the initiation and performance of sex acts with his long-term partner, as the more active party during sex and thus, during consent communication. He also upheld the gendered belief that men innately want more sex than women and are more interested in sex, which impacted the exchange of consent. It may be true that he wants more sex than his female partner, but Frank described this phenomenon as part of a universal experience of "being male". He explained that when he initiates sex there is a chance he "might just get my hand slapped and told I'm not in the mood" whereas it would be "quite rare" for him to refuse his girlfriend's initiation. He explained the dynamic comedically, which presented it as light-hearted and relatable. However, when consent is understood as asked of men to women, the assumption is that women may refuse but men always want sex. The gender stereotype that men always want sex and disregard for women asking men for consent led to some participants experiencing their consent being disregarded, ignored or assumed.

Henry had found it difficult to refuse sex in previous experiences: "I sometimes do find it difficult to say that 'cause I feel bad". He therefore associated feelings of guilt, worry and anxiety with expressing non-consent, which led him to engage in unwanted sex, out of fear of hurting the woman's feelings. Dylan also found it difficult to refuse unwanted sex in the past. He felt like his ability to directly refuse sex had increased

with age and maturity and that when he was younger he would "just go with it...just let it happen". He would not affirmatively consent but would passively allow sex to happen as he did not feel able to directly refuse. He also noted that sometimes he will give non-verbal hints that he wants to stop and the other person will either not notice or ignore these signs and he felt that with maturity, he has gained the confidence to verbally refuse. He explains: "as I got older...my self-confidence and my, like, view of the validity of my own, like, consent, or non-consent, has gone up". Now, he would "just come out and say" if he did not want to engage in sexual activity. With age, he has realised that his consent should not be assumed and he should have agency to accept or refuse sex, that his consent is important, it is "valid".

Eric felt pressure to have sex with his ex-girlfriend because it was what he felt they should be doing. He explained that after a month of dating he decided to have sex: "I guess it's because we've kind of been seeing each other for a month and hadn't had sex yet". His attitude towards sex seemed ambivalent with "I guess" and his reason for sex was arbitrary, due to the time elapsed rather than desire, suggesting an element of pressure from her or from wider social protocol to engage in sex. He explained that throughout the relationship she would often initiate sex by: "she'd kind of pull me on top of her and often start touching herself or alternatively start kind of grinding". Thus, she would start touching or stimulating herself to initiate sex. Instead of asking for consent, she was doing what she wanted to feel pleasure and waiting for him to join. Thus, his account depicts her as assuming that regardless of whether he wanted to engage sexually, he would be comfortable watching her stimulate herself. As the relationship progressed, his ex-girlfriend would more often initiate sex by touching his genitals directly or getting him naked: "more direct just putting her hands

down my underwear, trying to undress me, stuff like that". Eric conceptualised this touching as direct initiation rather than non-consent, however, in these examples his ex-girlfriend was starting sexual acts without thinking about his consent first.

Ellis explained that they also find it difficult to refuse sex due to negative reactions from women. During hook ups, which would often occur after a club night, if Ellis changed their mind, they felt the need to reassure in the refusal. They would say "I find you attractive but I don't really fancy sex". Due to the stereotype that men always want sex, Ellis worried that women may take refusal more personally, so they combat this in their communication. Ellis also described experiences whereby they went home with a woman after a night out and then felt unsure about sex. As a result, they have experienced women getting "frustrated not getting sex instantly" and have been "kicked out of their houses" and "yelled at", which was upsetting and heightened the pressure Ellis felt to agree next time. They also explained that this had "happened to quite a few other guys I know", that they had experienced "girls who have been really upset when you stop them", which makes it more difficult to refuse sex. In contrast, Ellis explained that "a lot of men, including myself" would respect a woman's decision if she refused sex, or wanted to stop midway, without reacting negatively.

Unfortunately, Ellis' one sexual experience recorded in the diary, was a poor example of consent, rife with gendered pressure, which exemplified some of their concerns noted above. They but felt a pressure, "an obligation" to continue once it had started. Following a night out of drinking, they woke up with a girl they knew liked them and had wanted to have sex with them for a while. They could gauge from a half-opened condom packet that sex had been attempted the night before, but had not happened,

and could not remember this. They then explained that she initiated sex in the morning, directly moving to explicit sexual touching, without trying to gauge consent. "I didn't like the idea of stopping it, cause there's been bad experiences in the past with stopping it and bad reactions from stopping it cause I didn't want to....I mean it's a lot of expectation, especially when you are presenting the male role to always want to finish and completion" (Ellis). Ellis felt pressured to go along with it, as they knew she liked them and did not want to hurt her feelings. They also explain that a period of poor mental health hindered their ability to refuse the unwanted sex. Ellis conceptualised the event as consensual but unwanted, as they did not refuse and "reciprocated", which is "a clear form of continuation", but did so because they felt they could not refuse or stop, due to previous experiences rooted in gender stereotypes.

Ellis had also experienced sexual assault in the past due to women not seeking their consent and assuming it was always given. Ellis explained: "there's a stigmatism where girls assume that guys always want it. So, there's a lot less consent being backwards rather than forwards. Which to an extent is probably true. And I don't break trend... umm actually I have been assaulted on a few times". Thus, Ellis was aware of the impact of gender roles on the exchange of consent, but still felt their impact. They explained that men or male presenting people will spend more time checking for their partner's consent, than giving their consent, as consent is still understood as a gendered, unidirectional exchange, asked by men towards women. They explained that "society" upholds the idea that "guys...at our age...always want to have sex", and thus, it is believed that "when a girl wants to do it, she has the right to do it", as only her consent is deemed important.

5.7 Superordinate Theme 1 Summary

In summary, the participants understood and defined ideal, verbal, explicit consent as a simple question and answer exchange such as: 'Do you want to have sex?', 'Yes'. However, they rarely practised consent in the moment following this definition. This was consistent with previous research which has found that the belief that affirmative consent is an awkward or robotic exchange, as it is taught in sex education programmes, can deter individuals from communicating consent verbally and directly in the moment (Edwards, Rehman and Byers, 2022; Shumlich & Fisher, 2020; Wignall, Stirling & Scoats, 2022; Bragg et al, 2021; Whittington, 2021).

Physical communication was largely used by the participants during sexual experiences to navigate consent, consistent with other studies which have shown the greater normalisation of non-verbal consent cues (Graf and Johnson, 2021; Goodcase, Spencer & Toews, 2021; Shumlich & Fisher, 2020; Rollero & Roccato, 2023; Willis et al, 2019). In their usual consent practice, the participants used body language to gauge consent and may not consciously notice signs of willingness, feeling this as an atmosphere or tone. This phenomenon was also found by Wignall, Stirling & Scoats et al (2022) and Muehlenhard et al (2016). Yet, they were more attuned to signs of non-consent or discomfort and were more consciously looking for a non-verbal 'no'. Some of the participants determined that silence or a lack of obvious refusal could be used to determine consent, whilst others relied on signs of physical arousal such as vaginal lubrication. Other studies have found that individuals often assume consent from signs of arousal (Graf and Johnson, 2021; Muehlenhard et al, 2016).

The participants utilised an assumed shared understanding of the normative heterosexual “cultural scenario”, to gauge consent, and slowly, tentatively, initiate sexual contact (Simon & Gagnon, 2002). A sexual encounter following these norms is conceptualised as a hierarchy of acts, progressing and increasing in perceived intimacy. Sex was described by the participants as being made up of stages, which are unidirectional and escalating, starting with a kiss or initial contact and ending with penetrative sex. Early stages might include acts such as a hand on the leg, touching the face, and a first kiss; these are termed “lower order” and considered less intimate (Willis et al, 2020:53). Later stages (“higher order” acts) might include touching erogenous zones, genitals, and sex acts such as oral or penetrative sex (Willis et al, 2020:53). These stages are present in discourses, such as when young people talk about the ‘bases’ of sex or ask ‘Did you go all the way?’. The stages are also embedded in the legal system. Lower order stages are reinforced as lower order, because if they are performed without consent this would be harassment or assault, higher order stages without consent would be assault or abuse, and the highest order, penetration, without consent, would be the most serious crime, rape (The Sexual Offences Act, 2003: s75-76).

The young men would often initiate a lower-order behaviour, which could be interpreted as friendly, to see if a woman might be interested in them sexually. If she accepted these behaviours with positive body language, or better still, reciprocated them, the participants determined she consented to the initiation of the next stage. A pattern of initiation, reciprocation, initiation, and reciprocation, continued as they

progressed through the stages of sex. The success of this approach was reliant on a shared understanding of the “cultural scenario” (Simon & Gagnon, 2002). The participants assumed that reciprocation of one stage could be used as consent to initiate the next stage because they assumed that their partner understood what those stages were. Thus, tentative physical movement towards a sex act was used to physically, and non-verbally ask for consent, and reciprocation or body language indicating willingness, was used to physically agree. Shumlich & Fisher (2020) suggest that sexual initiation can be tentative due to a fear of rejection, and thus this tentativeness serves the dual purpose of ensuring their partner’s ongoing consent and giving themselves time to notice unwillingness quickly to avoid the embarrassment of suggesting unwanted sex. The tentative physical gestures can be used to physically ask for consent, with each signal non-verbally asking, ‘is this ok?’.

If the participants did utilise verbal or more explicit consent in the moment, they would more often only do so for higher-order acts. Other studies have also found that individuals used verbal consent cues more often for higher-order sex acts (Willis et al, 2020; Willis & Smith, 2022; Rubin, 2007; Contos, 2022). The participants defined sex as penetration so might ask more directly for consent before this, but used non-verbal cues to navigate early contact, lower-order acts, and foreplay. Participants described using more non-verbal signals for lower-order acts, tentatively introducing them step by step. Once a few stages of lower-order acts had been non-verbally accepted, the participants were more confident that higher-order acts might be wanted. Therefore, asking for consent verbally served as a confirmation that their assumption was correct. The young men explained that they sometimes felt a need to ask for consent verbally, but they do this tentatively, only asking once they have gathered enough non-verbal

signals that consent will be given. Young men are likely to experience sexual shame and embarrassment about potential rejection, so this tentative approach could serve to avoid the shame of too directly suggested unwanted sex (Gibson, 2019; Gordon, 2018). For the participants, to initiate or ask for higher order acts too quickly, without first gauging comfort with lower order acts might be embarrassing, shameful, or inappropriate, echoing previous research about individuals' concern about asking for consent at the right time during an experience (Edwards, Rehman and Byers, 2022; Shumlich & Fisher, 2020). Due to a fear of rejection, potentially, they do not want to ask directly unless they are already sure that they will be accepted (Gordon, 2018; Stepien, 2016).

Gender roles and expected masculine behaviours in heteronormative sexual contexts also influenced and could complicate this largely physical consent communication (Connell, 2005; Thomas, 2000). The participants felt it was their role to determine their female partner's consent, consistent with other work in the field which explains that consent is conceptualised as something asked by men to women, in traditional heterosexual dynamics (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013; Willis et al, 2020 Setty, 2021). If asked for consent, the participants would communicate their acceptance or refusal more directly, whereas their partners would use more passive signs to show agreement or refusal. The participants then interpreted consent from passive signs in their female partners, such as body language indicating willingness, arousal, and a lack of obvious refusal. Affirmative consent policies which require an enthusiastic yes and teach that consent cannot be given passively are difficult for men to follow when gender roles lead the women they engage with to give or refuse consent more non-verbally and passively (Willis et al, 2019). When consent practice is non-verbal and

utilises assumptions from gender stereotypes and myths, it can lead to miscommunication (Setty, 2023).

Participants also carried a lot of gendered worry and shame regarding consent. Some expressed fears about accidentally assaulting someone, or being wrongly accused, due to current discourses about young men and harmful sexual behaviour. Discourses in the media, news and politics such as #MeToo and #EveryonesInvited, have led to a greater awareness of widespread sexual violence but also increased concern about accidental assault and false allegations (Setty, 2023; Stepien, 2016). This led the participants to want to be diligent about consent but also generated anxiety about sex and relationships. In contrast, many of the participants had experienced sexual harassment, assault or poor consent practice from partners. The participants expressed frustration that they felt their consent was largely assumed and not valued, due to a belief that men, particularly young men, always want sex. Other research has found supporting instances of men's consent being assumed or less highly valued than women's in heterosexual dynamics (Shumlich & Fisher, 2020; Kaestle, 2009; Sternin et al, 2022; Setty, 2022). They experienced sexual partners starting sex acts without gauging consent first or reacting negatively when refused. This caused them to accept unwanted sex, or to remain silent.

6 FINDINGS: SUPERORDINATE THEME 2: TALKING AND UNDERSTANDING BEYOND SEXUAL EXPERIENCES

6.1 Superordinate Theme 2 Introduction

The first superordinate theme described how, in their subjective and narrativised experiences, the participants used largely physical communication strategies to query and determine their partners' consent as well as demonstrate their own willingness or refusal. They did not often use verbal communication techniques in the moment. If they did verbally communicate in the moment, this was an addition to their mostly physical communication.

However, the participants did describe engaging in verbal communication about sex outside of the bedroom which helped them to navigate consent in the moment. This was present in their narratives across the initial interview, diaries and follow-up interview, so was a behaviour they engaged in prior to the study and during the study. They engaged in wider communications about their desires and boundaries which made them feel like they could better understand how their partner physically shows consent, the activities they would and would not be open to, and could lead to more pleasurable experiences.

In addition, the participants in longer-term relationships reported that they found consent easier to navigate in the moment. Over time they could learn from experience and ongoing conversation what their partner likes, the subtle signs they emit indicating

willingness or discomfort and routines for consent, which from their perspective felt mutually understood between themselves and their partners.

The following chapter explores how the participants used verbal communication, mostly outside of a sexual moment, to help them better navigate and understand consent in the moment. This superordinate theme contains four sub-themes which are explored in turn in this chapter and summarised in the table below:

COMMUNICATING ABOUT DESIRE DURING SEX	The participants noted a connection between quality sexual communication and increased pleasure.
DISCUSSING SEX IN ADVANCE	The participants described having explicit and ongoing conversations about sex outside of the moment (what was and was not wanted) with their sexual partners.
CREATING ROUTINES FOR CONSENT	The participants explained that over time they developed routines for consent with their ongoing sexual partners specific to that partner and relationship.
QUICKLY READING SIGNALS	As the participants learnt their partner's specific and potentially subtle signals over time, noting when sex was wanted and the type of sex wanted became quick and easy.

Table 3: Table of the sub-themes within Superordinate Theme 2

6.2 Sub-Theme: Communicating About Desire During Sex

Effective consent communication and sexual pleasure were interwoven for the participants involved in this study. Seven of the 11 participants explained that their consent strategy could be erotic or pleasurable in itself. Direct communication about

sex could take the form of dirty talk and enthusiastic consent could be arousing because it highlighted how much their partner wanted them and the sexual act. Communication served the joint purpose of sharing boundaries as well as desires. This section first explores how the participants used dirty talk as a form of explicit sexual communication as part of their consent practice. The section then explains how the participants understood consensual sex as more pleasurable and thus would note signs of a lack of desire as indicative of a potential lack of consent.

6.2.1 Using Dirty Talk as Sexual Communication During Sex:

When asked if he would ever search for porn with explicit consent during the study process, Chris reflected that porn with clearer consent is likely to also be more arousing to watch. He explained that when people are "feeling comfortable" "there's a good chance...they're going to be having better sex" and thus, he feels that good consent practice enables more sexual pleasure. Chris also used to play "drinking/card games with his partner" which were utilised to enable sexual communication in a fun and sexy way. They would make different rules for the game, each becoming increasingly sexual, through which they could ask each other to perform certain acts or suggest behaviours, and the other person could agree or refuse. Within the context of the games communication about desires and boundaries was explicit but also fun.

Similarly, Frank described that he and his partner frequently utilised dirty talk as a form of verbal consent to communicate what they wanted to do (to ask for consent) and their ongoing agreement. This ensured that consent felt clear and was pleasurable in itself. Throughout his diary entries, when prompted to share how he knew his partner

asked for and gave consent, Frank directly recorded that "verbal consent and dirty talk" were used together highlighting how verbal consent could be erotic and fun. In multiple diary entries, he gave examples of where dirty talk was used to ask for consent and express a desire to engage in sexual acts such as: "I want to fuck you", and "fuck me harder". They would ask for consent by suggesting new sex acts: "play with my nipples", and "use your tongue". In one example in his diaries he said that his partner "said 'I think I've been naughty' and presented bum" as a way to ask for sex acts. In addition, when prompted in the diary to record how he communicated agreement to sex with his partner, he repeatedly said via "dirty talk during sexual activity". These examples from Frank's diary entries demonstrated how the couple utilised verbal consent but changed the tone, so it also functioned as dirty talk. For example, they often used "fuck" when asking for consent rather than 'sex', which added a tone of playfulness and eroticism. These verbal comments also potentially improved their sexual encounters because they allowed them to directly state what they wanted and how they wanted it. When asked to expand on the use of dirty talk as consent communication at the interview, Frank described it as serving as "two birds one stone". It ensured that all sex acts were consented to and all sex acts were desired and would bring pleasure. In his diary entry, Tim also utilised direct verbal consent strategies but adjusted the tone so it could also function as dirty talk. He described: "I told her to take off her clothes and she did". Verbal consent was reframed as a demand rather than a question. It functioned in the same way, making his desire clear and giving her the opportunity to accept or refuse, but the tone was more playful and erotic.

With casual sexual partners, Ellis said they would use clear consent strategies to benefit "foreplay" ensuring agreement and increasing sexual pleasure. These may be

verbal but may also take the form of tentative physical suggestions. "Benefits foreplay 'cause they get more frustrated...so it's not purely for consent reasons to do that, but it still is a very, very good clear sign of consent" (Ellis). Ellis explained that they would introduce new touches gradually, checking in frequently for agreement, which they have learnt from experience can build sexual frustration (increased arousal from built up desire and anticipation) in their partners as well as ensure ongoing consent. Another participant, John (and his partner), asked for consent via expressing their desire. "I kind of got this, 'I want you', thing from her... that's kind of how she started doing it. 'Oh, I really want you'... that's kind of a way to turn me on as well, to be honest" (John). He explained that hearing "I want you" would arouse him because it was exciting to feel desired. Asking for consent in this manner was both clear and was a "turn-on" from his perspective.

6.2.2 A Lack of Obvious Desire Was A Sign of Possible Non-Consent:

The participants often conflated consent with desire or arousal, therefore they used signs of desire as signs of consent and if they were unsure of their partner's enjoyment they would doubt their consent. One of the participants, Dylan, expressed that clear consent practice was "more enjoyable" because in initiating or suggesting sex gradually and checking in for consent, there was more "anticipation", building desire and arousal through the communication acts. He explained that he struggles to understand how anyone could find sex "arousing" when "someone doesn't seem like they want to have sex", because being desired is pleasurable. Thus, ensuring consent was vital ethically, but also to ensure a mutually enjoyable sexual experience. Dylan also explained that if a partner consented but was not as enthusiastic, this feels awkward and uncomfortable. He also explained that he knows from experience how it

feels to have sex when he does not want it as much as his partner and so would not want to put that pressure on a partner. Therefore, if his partner looked uncomfortable, the empathy felt for their situation, "really puts me off".

Zixin agreed that sex needs to be agreed to and "enjoyable for both people" and sex without mutual enjoyment "means nothing". Thus, he reiterated that consent is vital to ensure that everyone wants to take part in the activity and enjoys it, merging ideas of consent and pleasure. Owen also differentiated between a casual partner passively agreeing to sex and enthusiastically agreeing, using signs of desire to determine and define enthusiasm. He explained that it was important to determine that she was "really kind of up for it, rather than just going along with it". Owen would also verbally reassure his partner of his ongoing consent via both vocalising his agreement and the pleasure he is feeling: "so I'd say like that feels really good or something", to show his enthusiasm via showing his pleasure. In doing so, he informed his partner that he was enjoying the experience, which may be erotic for her, provided guidance about the type of pleasure he likes to receive, as well as explicitly giving consent.

6.3 Sub-theme: Discussing Sex in Advance

The participants used more non-verbal consent communication in the moment. If they did communicate verbally it more often took the form of small suggestive utterances or dirty talk, or (as explored in the first superordinate theme) was just used to confirm or double-check consent following physical communication. However, they did engage in effective ongoing communication about sex with their sexual partners outside of the moment. When the participants were able to have clear conversations about their

sexual desires (things they want to try as well as things they do not like and their limits or boundaries) they found it felt easier to navigate consent in the moment using their mostly physical communication strategies and from their perspective, could have more pleasurable, fulfilling experiences. Ten out of the 11 participants' data reflected this theme.

These conversations felt more beneficial when the participants and their partners felt able to voice what they did or did not want, a confidence that Newstrom, Harris & Miner (2021) term "sexual self-assurance". These conversations were used by the participants and their partners to plan future sexual encounters, set safe words and establish expectations for sex. They could also be utilised with casual or new partners with initial conversations or communications about sex taking place on a night out or before a planned hookup. This section firstly explains how the participants engaged in ongoing verbal communication with sexual partners outside of a sexual moment which allowed them to feel like they could better navigate consent using physical communication in the moment. The section secondly explores examples the participants gave of explicitly planning and agreeing to sexual experiences in advance.

6.3.1 Ongoing Communication About Boundaries and Desires:

One of the participants, Dylan, would have direct conversations with his sexual partners about what they like or want to happen. He explained that if he was unsure what "type" of sex his partner liked, the act or style, the only reliable way to find this out was to ask them. Thus, he could have open ongoing dialogues with his sexual partners about what was and was not wanted during sex and navigate consent through

these. He explained that if he just tried to initiate sex or ask for sexual consent with someone without any discussion beforehand which hints at sex this could feel "out of the blue" and awkward or more difficult to navigate. In contrast, if he was meeting someone "explicitly to hook up", there would be less "preamble" or tentativeness in the moment, because they had already communicated the desire to have sex. Dylan had also experienced sexual assault in the past. He described an open dialogue with a previous partner where he talked to them about this and they discussed related sexual needs and boundaries.

"I talked to this person, my partner at the time, extensively about like the various things that happened with me like sexually in the past. And for that reason, I think they wanted to make it very clear that I wasn't under any obligation to have sex with them, but they wouldn't love me any less and they wouldn't respect me any less for not having sex with them, which was a huge turning point in my life...that was when I really started realising I can have my own agency"

The reassurance and respect conveyed via this open dialogue allowed Dylan to discuss his anxieties about sex and assumptions about what would happen if sex was refused. Through direct communication about sex, sexual needs and consent, Dylan felt that he had "agency" and autonomy, and that his consent would be respected and was important, which allowed him to better navigate consent communication afterwards. Potentially gendered stereotypes that men are always interested in sex, led to previous experiences where Dylan felt like he had no agency because his refusal was not seriously considered.

Chris described how he and his previous long-term partner would often have detailed conversations about sex after having sex. In this moment they felt the most comfortable sharing their needs due to the increased vulnerability, intimacy and confidence in being open with each other. These conversations helped them to navigate future sexual experiences. "Kind of after sex, or something. It'd always be this like fairly, quite a wholesome long kind of conversation where we would just talk about the sex and kind of talk about like things you really liked. Things you didn't so much. And that communication I thought was really great because ultimately you're just like going to be having better sex with each other because you, you know what the other person likes or doesn't like" (Chris). Chris explained that this ongoing communication was highly beneficial to their relationship and improved their sexual experiences; it ensured that they understood each other's desires and boundaries and thus consent was woven into the communication. Chris' description of the conversation as "wholesome" potentially indicates that it was comfortable and respectful, and contrasted an expected idea that sexual conversations are always sensitive, uncomfortable or taboo.

With his current long-term partner, Frank found it easy to "openly discuss" things he would like to try or want to incorporate into their sex life. Similarly, he explained that his partner would tell him about her sexual desires. Thus, via ongoing communications about sex, they could (re)evaluate evolving sexual desires and boundaries in their relationship. During the study period, Frank and his partner watched the sample porn videos together. There was one "where someone got shagged on the kitchen counter", which prompted his partner to comfortably say that she would like to "try" that with him in the future. "Try" suggested an open-mindedness, that these ongoing

communications allowed them to try out new things, but if it was not enjoyable or did not work for them, there was no pressure to continue.

Through engaging in wider conversations about sex, the participants could establish preferences and boundaries. John noted that there may be times when his partner desired sex but did not consent, such as when she was on her period. John explained that his partner did not like to have sex on her period, so even when "mentally they're fully into it", this would mean that they do not have sex. John knowing that his partner did not like to have sex on her period indicated that they have engaged in communication about this topic in the past, and from this communication, he had learnt this was an ongoing boundary. John also engaged in direct conversations about oral sex and when this would be wanted. He learnt that his partner did not like to receive oral sex and would only give oral sex directly after a shower. Thus, he felt that this direct conversation allowed them to understand each other's boundaries, and which acts they would and would not consent to do.

Chima also previously engaged in communications about period sex with his partner. "I brought it up...I enjoyed having sex with her and so it's not something I necessarily want to stop doing 'cause she was on her period. It was something that she didn't necessarily want to stop doing 'cause she was on her period. So we tried it once the last time like a month ago, the last time she was on her period, and it went quite well" (Chima). He felt comfortable initiating a conversation about his desire to have sex with his partner whilst she was menstruating and via this conversation, they were able to trial the experience. Chima used "tried" to express that the discussion alone was not

enough to determine if the act would be enjoyed and wanted in future. Thus, they were able to communicate about desires and boundaries in advance, rather than waiting until directly prior to sex.

In addition, desires and boundaries could be learnt from previous experiences and applied to future experiences. Owen recalled an instance where the first time he had sex with a particular woman, she non-verbally indicated a preference for “doggy style” as a sex position, moving her body into position to suggest this act. Therefore: "on another occasion when I had sex with the same girl because I then knew from the last time that she liked doing doggy style, I actually said, 'do you want to do doggy style?' And that was on the second time. When I've got to know her a bit better" (Owen). He determined her preferences from their last experience together and was more confident to directly suggest the act, knowing from prior non-verbal signals that she liked it. Thus, through experience and getting to know her better, he was able to determine her preferences and boundaries to feel like he could navigate consent more easily.

Ellis also expressed that good consent practice was a part of continued "communication" and "connection". They explained that if someone was a regular sexual partner, albeit casual, each time they have sex they can learn from the experience and from conversation following the experience what might be wanted or not wanted next time. They explained that there would be some communication prior to an initial casual encounter, during the night out, or on the way back to the house they have agreed to go to for sex. During that experience, there would also be

communication and connection built up over the night and in the morning, "cuddling, chatting, learning about them", which could aid the next time they have sex. They had learnt that in some relationships sex is wanted frequently, which resulted in less verbal discussion because they were aware that their partner was comfortable with frequent sexual contact. However, if their sexual partner wanted sex less frequently, or only in particular circumstances, or was more nervous, they would use more verbal consent, and explicitly check in more often. Thus, through experience, Ellis learnt how to adjust their communication style according to their partners' preferences. Ellis would also initiate direct conversations with a previous sexual partner about how they were interpreting non-verbal signals, to check they had learnt to look for the correct signs and signals. "I discussed after saying, by the way, I took that from what you did...she was like, you are correct". They both learnt to recognise specific consent preferences from experience and wanted to communicate directly, to ensure that consent would be easy to navigate with that partner in the future.

6.3.2 Planning Future Sexual Experiences:

Sometimes participants planned or scheduled sex or suggested when sex might be likely to occur. Chima gave an example of when sex was planned in advance to fulfil a specific fantasy. He described that his partner wanted to go into her room and undress before welcoming him in, which was effectively communicated as a desire, agreed to, and then carried out.

From his perspective, Tim and his long-term partner were also comfortable talking about sex, planning future sex and setting boundaries for future sex, and thus

engaging in frequent communication to navigate consent. He explained in a diary entry: "we'd discussed the night before, it was our last night together for a couple of weeks and we were both too tired on Saturday night so we said we'd both be up for it in the morning". This moment suggested effective ongoing consent communication. Tim consistently used "we" suggesting that decisions were made together and both parties were comfortable with the arrangements. In interview, Tim expanded on the moment explaining that they were staying at his parent's house where the bed is squeaky so they discussed having sex in the morning when his parents would be out of the house. His detailed explanation suggested that they were able to have a nuanced discussion about sex and when it would be wanted. He explained in the interview that as they were not going to see each other for a while, they wanted to prioritise sex and for it to be a "good experience", which was achieved via ongoing communication. In addition, Tim and his partner had an agreed "safeword, in case either of us want to stop". This indicated that they must have engaged in prior conversations about sex and consent to decide upon the safeword and allowed them to be more experimental during sex because they had a quick and easy-to-use signal to indicate that an act needed to stop.

John and his partner only engaged in sex once during the study period and this was preplanned and described in his diary entry. They were able to discuss why they had not had sex for a while, express that it was wanted, and planned a time to devote to it when they "had an empty house" and had space to be intimate. "We'd essentially talked about doing it on this day because it was the first time we'd see each other after all life pressures had subsided. She was wet and moaning and told me to put on a condom to have sex with" (John). John explained that they would not usually plan sex

in advance, however, it was useful in these extenuating circumstances whereby they had not had sex for a while. John felt that being able to communicate about sex allowed him and his partner to connect and be intimate during a challenging time.

Ellis also gave an example of preplanned consent with an ex-girlfriend. They explained that they would engage in role-play and experiment with power dynamics, which would involve communication beforehand about what would be wanted and how refusal could be readily communicated. They explained that on one occasion they used a remote-controlled vibrator, through which they could experiment with the fantasy of being "in full control of the situation". "I just give them a birthday-valentine-something present...and it was class and obviously they would put it in for a period... if they said stop I obviously would" (Ellis). The act of giving the sex toy as a gift prompted and facilitated a discussion about how and when the toy could be used, establishing desires and boundaries, and they agreed on how refusal could be communicated when the toy was in place.

Some preplanning might also occur for casual sexual experiences, such as arranging to meet someone on a dating app for sex. Tim described an instance where he had met someone on Tinder in the past and they arranged a casual encounter via "dirty talk". He described the "dirty talk" as effective communication as it suggested that sex might be wanted, but Tim did not conceptualise this as a discussion, as it was different in tone from a formal conversation about sex and consent. "It was someone I'd met on Tinder and we'd sort of not discussed, but it was sort of like dirty talk. And then it was sort of implied that we might both want to have sex with each other" (Tim). They then

utilised non-verbal strategies in the moment, but this was easier to navigate as they had already communicated about sex prior to meeting up. Tim used "might" to highlight that sex may not happen, the communication did not mean that sex was compulsory afterwards, respecting the right to refuse in the moment.

Although currently in a serious relationship, Frank explained that in the past a casual hookup after a night out felt like a "smooth transition"; it was easy to navigate. He explained, "the initiation from snogging in a nightclub and going back to someone's flat doesn't seem quite as difficult". Throughout the process of meeting someone, kissing and arranging to go home together, many smaller communications were enacted over the period, which built up an understanding that sex was likely to be wanted. He explained that with one woman, they first met on Tinder, which sparked an initial online conversation. They then met in person in a nightclub and "were snogging each other all night", he walked her home and she clearly refused sex. They continued conversing via text, and went out again, after that they went home together and had sex. Thus, via ongoing communication, over a longer period of time, they were able to effectively navigate consent. Frank has also reflected that whilst "snogging" and agreeing to go home together may suggest that sex might be wanted, someone may change their mind or not be into it. He explained that "sex is a different category to snogging", they are two different 'stages' as reflected in the first superordinate theme. Therefore, whilst a kiss suggests to Frank that higher-order acts may be wanted, it does not guarantee it.

Zixin, as an international student, explained the norms of having casual sex in China, which would always be in a hotel. He explained that in China, hotels are cheap and easy to book because it is the norm to frequent them for sex because it would not be considered appropriate to have sex in a shared family home. Therefore, sex needed to be discussed and planned somewhat in advance, because they needed to agree to visit and book a hotel. He explained that when he was on a date, he could easily ask directly if she would like to go to a hotel afterwards. From that question, she would understand that he was asking to have sex because there is a shared cultural understanding that going to a hotel is synonymous with having sex. Although Zixin relied on more passive signals in the moment, assuming consent unless it is refused, this felt effective for him, because consent had been more directly established via communications prior, during the arrangement of a hotel room.

6.4 Sub-theme: Creating Routines for Consent

Thus far, the second superordinate theme has explored the relationship between explicit consent communication and desire, as well as how the participants engaged in more verbal communication outside of the moment to help them communicate consent using more physical communication strategies in the moment. In talking about consent outside of sexual experiences they felt like they could better understand their sexual partners' boundaries and desires and share their own.

As found in other studies, nine out of the 11 participants explained that in their current and previous relationships consent became easier to navigate over time. This was because they learnt more about the other person from experience; what they like, and

do not like, and the non-verbal signals they exhibit (Newstrom, Harris & Miner, 2021; Graf and Johnson, 2021). They also felt increasingly comfortable expressing their needs with their partners as well as effectively reading signals. Over time, the participants felt that they had learnt their partner's specific and subtle signals which communicate a desire to have sex, acceptance and refusal, and that their partner understood them in return. As expressed in the first superordinate theme, there are some universal signs of agreement in body language, however, individuals also have their own subtleties and unique indicators which can be understood better over time.

Then, based on prior experience of their time together, the participants and their partners created routines for how they specifically would communicate consent with each other. Interpersonal sexual scripts, repeated patterns of behaviours developed between individuals, are unique to the specific people involved (Simon & Gagnon, 2002). Therefore, these routines for consent could be understood as a type of interpersonal sexual script, a consent script. Participants shared narratives which described their current consent routines with current long-term partners, and this section will explore this first. Secondly, the section shall explore the reflections of participants who shared their consent routines with previous long-term partners.

6.4.1 Routines of Participants in Long-Term Relationships During The Study:

Frank highlighted that when he has sex with his long-term partner, consent is not often consciously thought about in the moment and feels easy to navigate because he and his partner know each other well. He explained, "you don't really think about it too much". However, sex would usually start when they were already in bed, the location

hinting that sex may be wanted, he repeated "probably" and "typically" when talking about this at interview, highlighting this as a usual pattern of behaviour. After that he or his partner would start to touch the other and the combination of the location and touches were mutually understood as exhibiting a desire for sex. He and his partner had developed a routine, a "rhythm", which helps them to initiate and respond: "we may have sort of fallen into a rhythm, do you know what I mean? We sort of know to initiate it with one another if that makes sense?". In his narrative, both partners initiate and respond in the same way, utilising shared hints which help them to understand each other's intentions. Frank repeated "we" to highlight this was a shared experience and understanding between them, however, his questioning tone suggested some uncertainty over whether this experience is understandable or widely shared. He continued: "I suppose it just takes time just to get to know one another doesn't it? To get to know what that person's into and what elicits a positive response". Thus, over time, he learnt his partner's preferences, understanding what they enjoy or find arousing, to help initiate or suggest sex and recognise signs of willingness.

In contrast, he explained that with a new partner "when you first get to know each other it's a bit more awkward" because "you don't necessarily know that the other person likes", they have not had enough experience to understand what they do and do not want during sex. Similarly, he expressed that if a new partner refused or looked uncomfortable this may cause more worry or anxiety that he had done something wrong but this was easier to navigate with a longer-term partner due to increased comfort. Frank and his partner could quickly recognise signs in each other that sex might not be wanted: "I think if it's a less, think if it's not particularly enthusiastic, we're both likely to just stop before anything actually happens. I think we're just sort of at

that point where we just go, okay, I can tell the other person isn't particularly up for this during the sort of initiation stage, I think when we're at that". They did not often directly refuse sex, because signs of discomfort or refusal were quickly noticed and acted upon before either of them needed to refuse directly. He linked this to their relationship status, as they are "at that point"; they have reached a level of commitment and understanding which makes this unspoken communication feel seamless to him. In his current relationship they had a "very strong understanding of the other's consent" or when "something might not be right", which made it feel "secure".

Throughout his diary entries, Frank described himself and his partner initiating sex and understanding consent in the same way for each entry. They usually used dirty talk as verbal sexual negotiation and mirrored body language to show ongoing agreement, repeating the same routine for consent and initiation each time across different experiences. In each diary entry, he would either make note of these behaviours or he would write "ibid" as his response, to indicate that he and his partner were communicating consent in the same way each time. In the second interview, he reflected that he does not consciously mirror his partner's actions to show his agreement, but this "perhaps could be an unconscious thought". Thus, their non-verbal signalling was seamless and easy for them both to understand.

For John and his long-term partner, initiating sex and responding had become "pretty straightforward" because he was able to readily interpret intent, to understand, "I want you, oh she wants me", from their mutual behaviours towards each other. John described how he and his partner had a routine of initiating sex by saying verbally to

each other "I want you", which clearly demonstrated their desire to have sex with each other. He described this: "that's sort of the pattern we've got into. It's always that sort of thing". He was conscious that he and his partner followed a set "pattern", a routine for how they initiate sex and navigate consent. He highlighted that it "always", followed that pattern. At the start of the relationship his partner would verbally say that she wanted him as her preferred way of navigating consent. Over time he learnt that this was her preference and followed suit and so it became their mutually established routine. In his diary, John described them initiating consent verbally in this way and explained that "this was no different to how we usually go about sex". However, John also described that he understood from "how we were kissing that she wanted it too", thus, over time, he had also learnt the subtleties of her body language and the intent behind different types of kisses.

Dylan was in a long-term relationship with his non-binary partner during the study. Over time, Dylan learnt that "they also have quite high sex drive", suggesting that he learnt their preferences from experience or conversation. Dylan also highlighted how his partner will usually initiate sex and how he has learnt to recognise and interpret those signals. He explained, "they tend to kiss me in a very specific, certain way, like long slow kisses". Dylan's use of "normally", suggested that this was a usual pattern of behaviour, whilst highlighting the specific nature of the kiss, suggested that Dylan had learnt the subtleties of his partner's body language to understand the difference between a kiss and a kiss to initiate sex.

Tim, who also had a long-term partner during the study period, found it easy to recognise subtle signs and signals in his partner that sex was wanted. He also repeatedly initiated sex in a similar way each time; he tended to kiss her neck knowing that this would both arouse her and convey that he wanted to have sex. In his diary, he described this move: "I kissed her neck (where she enjoys it)", suggesting that he had learnt this about her from experience and felt confident that it was enjoyed. He explained in his diary that after kissing her neck, he waited for her to "respond in a way that I knew meant we would be intimate". Thus, she could interpret his intentions from his neck kiss, and he felt able to understand further subtle signals from her, that sex would be wanted. Tim was confident that he understands what his partner enjoys sexually, and thus what she is comfortable with and where her boundaries are. He explained in his diaries and in interview, that he was the "more dominant one", and she was happy for him "to take control and move her about". His confidence suggested that he had learnt her preference either from prior conversation or from experience. When she initiates sex, she would expect him to initiate further sexual contact, which was a learnt and established usual pattern of behaviours. He described; "she likes to just let me take it from there", and "she'll sort of expect me to then start the touching and stuff". Their sexual experiences usually started non-verbally, mirroring behaviours such as removing each other's clothing. Tim described this pattern as "the usual" and explained that it had "always" been that way, depicting a typical routine of behaviour established within the couple. In addition, when prompted in the diary entries to record why consent was clear, Tim repeatedly explained that he and his partner told each other that they loved each other, suggesting that this functions as a manner of reassuring each other of consent and enjoyment.

Tim explained in interview that consent felt easy to navigate due to the length of their relationship and the understanding of each other they had developed. He described consent as "straightforward", as simple to understand, which he directly related as being due to their long-term relationship. "I think that probably comes from being boyfriend and girlfriend, whereas I think it would probably be a lot different if you were just having one-night stands with people. Whereas, because we, we've obviously been together for nearly two years now, so yeah, it's a bit more like straightforward in that sense" (Tim). Another participant, Chima, explained that the way in which consent is navigated "depends on the relationship", specific to the people involved and the dynamic they have. He conveys this in a blunt, direct sentence, conveying confidence. "So when it's more casual, it's more suggestive, and when it's a more serious relationship, it's just more straightforward" (Chima). Thus, in a longer-term relationship consent felt easier for him to navigate. Whereas in a casual relationship, consent might be "more suggestive", more tentative and less comfortable.

6.4.2 Participants Reflecting on Routines in Previous Relationships:

Chris was in an eight-year-long relationship prior to his involvement in the study and reflected on how consent was navigated in his long-term relationship. He explained that over time he developed a nuanced understanding of the subtle signals that his partner was or was not interested in having sex. "They always would always kiss me back or touch me back in a certain way. It was different when it was just making out or whatever. There was this kind of passion that I could kind of get there... there was this kind of sense of urgency" (Chris). He reported that he could readily determine from the type of kiss, whether a kiss was wanted or if the kiss was going to lead to having sex. He paused after sharing this at interview, uncertain of how to characterise the

nature of the kiss in words. They would know where to touch each other to both arouse their partner and to suggest that sex might be wanted: "the other person would know where to touch the other person that kind of says, oh hey, are you up for something" (Chris). He explained that he would routinely touch her thigh, whilst she would run a finger up his back, and they would both immediately understand that specific touch was being used to suggest sex. Each touch queried if they were ok with that and might want more, as they moved together towards sexual acts. For Chris, this nuanced understanding of each other was "really only developed after being together a long, long time" and allowed non-verbal consent to be quickly and accurately determined. Similarly, Chris could easily determine when sex was not wanted. Usually, they would make a suggestive move, mutually understood as signalling a desire for sex, and the other person would respond quickly with another signalling move. Therefore, if there was no response, they could easily understand that sex was unlikely to be wanted, it would be "clear to me, you are not interested in that kind of thing right now". Due to increased comfort and understanding, Chris would also find it easy to verbally refuse sex, to suggest a different type of sex, or to have sex at a different time, it was easy to put those "boundaries" in place. However, Chris reflected that when he starts to have sex with new people, he would "want to be really careful" about "picking up the correct signals", because he will not yet have learnt the signals which they specifically convey. He also expressed concern about wanting to determine more explicitly that consent was present with a new person but thinks it might be "difficult to be sexy and kind of check for that".

Eric described becoming more familiar with the signs of consent in his past relationship as time progressed, looking for similar signs, specific to her, each time. This allowed

them to experiment more as the relationship progressed because they could quickly and easily notice if a new behaviour was wanted or not. Eric expanded on a specific event, the first time he put his ex-partner over his knees and noticed that it aroused her. The first time, it happened accidentally, as she leaned over him to look at her phone and he playfully "pinned her down". He explained that he quickly noticed from her body language that she had become aroused and used this as a sign to transition into sexual behaviours; he "realised that she was turned on by it, so then carried on". From that point onwards, Eric remembered that this was enjoyed and so incorporated it more frequently, learning from the prior experience: "I remember the first time that I had her over my knees, she seemed quite turned on. I was like, okay, well she seems to like that. I liked it too. So then I guess going forward, I just did it more often" (Eric). Eric also noted that over time, he learnt the specific signals she would give out, which indicated willingness or arousal. He explained that she had "a certain way that she'd grimace and then kind of twitch her body", and he felt confident he had "learnt to read the subtleties at that point". "At that point" suggested that this skill has been developed over the course of their time together. However, Eric found it difficult to describe the expression verbally, repeating "I really dunno how to say it", "dunno if I could describe it". Early in the relationship, Eric described their "sex life" following the "same pattern", a set routine, however, although this felt easier to navigate, it also led to him "getting bored" with their sex.

The participants also reported becoming attuned to the tone their partners would use to communicate when they did or did not desire sexual activity. Zixin explained that with a previous sexual partner, they would often playfully refuse, but he was confident from the specific tone used whether it was a coy refusal or if sex was actually

unwanted. He described that she would say "stop doing that at the beginning, but says some honey words after that", and from the sweetness of her tone, he was confident that sexual touch was wanted. He also used this same technique with her, so it was a mutual understanding. He expanded that the signals which conveyed consent or non-consent, "depend on my partner", so he needed to learn their specific preferences and signals. In contrast, with another partner, she "doesn't really like to refuse you", but would "act unhappy", she would rely on passive signals to convey non-consent, not wanting to refuse verbally or directly. Therefore, Zixin reported that if he perceived signs of her unhappiness, he would understand "that she doesn't really want it" and would stop.

6.5 Sub-theme: Quickly Reading Signals

When the participants had created a routine for consent with an ongoing sexual partner or were confident in their understanding of their partner's unique and subtle signals of consent or non-consent, they felt that they could navigate consent quickly and easily in the moment. This was expressed by eight out of the 11 participants. If they noticed signs of initiation in their partner, they could quickly respond with signs of acceptance or refusal and if they showed signs of initiation to their partner, they could quickly respond to their partners' signs of acceptance or refusal. Due to a detailed understanding of the other person, the nature of their relationship and the current context, they could respond to cues swiftly in a way which felt less conscious. Their ability to quickly read and respond to their partner's unique signals was learnt from experience and understanding that person over time. However, we cannot be sure of their accuracy as partners were not consulted for this study.

John explained that he could understand from the type of kiss offered by his partner, whether sex might be wanted or not and could very quickly perceive this tone and respond appropriately. "It's pretty quick to tell like what kissing is like I'm really into it I want you kissing, and what would be like, I dunno where this is going, I'm not really feeling it, which is sort of a lot more hesitant, yeah, not as much sort of force into it. So that's a pretty quick indicator I'd say" (John). John repeated "pretty quick" to emphasise the speed of their mutual understanding of each other's signals. John explained that this indicator is mutual as they were both signalling to each other and simultaneously perceiving each other's signals. If the kiss indicated possible unwillingness, John would pause for a moment to check in with his partner. Sex would usually occur when they were already in bed together so he notices whether the kiss is to say goodnight or to initiate sex. Once they had determined that sex was wanted further activities would start quickly, without tentativeness or hesitation, because they were confident they understood what was wanted. John reiterates: "Yeah, it all happens quite quickly".

Tim similarly explained that consent felt easy to navigate because he and his partner are "at that stage now where nothing's awkward", linking the length of their relationship to increased understanding and comfort. It would be "simple" for them to verbally refuse sex and they would feel comfortable doing so. Tim gives an example of when he quickly determined that a new act was enjoyed. He described how he lightly put his "hand around her neck to turn her head" to kiss her during sex. In doing so, he could quickly perceive signals that this was enjoyed; she kissed him back and leant into the

movement. From that, he could determine it was wanted and continued. In a quick exchange of non-verbal signals, Tim was sure he could determine his partner's comfort and enjoyment and react accordingly.

Furthermore, Frank noted that consent could be more difficult to navigate with a new sexual partner due to awkwardness about explicitly stating desires or boundaries and a lack of familiarity with each other's specific non-verbal signals. Frank explained that "early on" it "can feel very awkward" to verbally say what is or is not wanted. As he and his partner have been together for a long time, he felt confident that they can "read each other's body language very, very quickly" and can easily determine what is wanted. He also quickly determines from the tone of kisses, whether his partner might consent to further, more intimate acts (further stages as expressed in superordinate theme 1) and described that he would respond accordingly. "If I try and kiss my girlfriend I can then very quickly tell if she's receptive or not to it and if she's not in that mood, mood and I quite, completely stop" (Frank). Frank linked his quick perception of his partner's body language to the length of their relationship. He explained: "we're very much at a stage where if she sort of leans over and tries to initiate something, we can both tell within a few, within 30 seconds if the other one is just not going to be receptive to that". His use of "at that stage" suggested that this ability was directly related to their long-term relationship and is something which had been built up over time. He also repeated "we" and talked about interpreting signals as a mutual understanding; they both quickly read and respond to each other.

6.6 Superordinate Theme 2 Summary

In conclusion, from the experiences and subjective viewpoints of the participants, consent was practised as a nuanced communication, involving mutual sharing and listening, rather than as a simple exchange, whereby consent is obtained by one person from the other. Outside of the bedroom and separate to sexual experiences, the participants described how they engaged in wider discussions with their sexual partners about sexual desires, acts they want to try, as well as boundaries, what they do not enjoy or do not want to try. These communications occur frequently over the course of a relationship and may take the form of direct conversations about sex or may be learnt from previous experiences and remembered for next time. The participants described engaging in conversations with their partners about when they can have sex, and the type of sex they want (planning for when they have an empty house, scheduling sex before they will be apart for a while, setting boundaries for sex during menstruation, and trying out new toys and positions). They also used this technique to navigate casual experiences in a way which felt successful. For example, if they met someone in a bar or nightclub, communications would start there and continue as they went home together. This became an ongoing process of continued communication and checking in before any sexual contact had begun (Muehlenhard et al, 2016).

The conversations occurring outside of a sexual moment, as described by the research participants were also “sexual self-disclosure” (SSD) conversations, through which they could communicate their desires, what they want and what they find pleasurable and their boundaries and what they did not consent to (Newstrom, Harris & Miner, 2021: 456). The participants who engaged in these conversations also

demonstrated heightened sexual assertiveness because they felt confident to clearly communicate their sexual needs to their partner (Schooler et al, 2005). Thus, the participants' ability to comfortably communicate about sex, helped them to navigate consent.

Effective, open conversation about sexual desires and boundaries ensured that sex was both consensual and more pleasurable for the participants. These conversations resulted in participants feeling that the sex was more pleasurable because they understood what was wanted as much as they understood what was not wanted. They also explained that sex was more pleasurable when consent was clear because it was arousing to be enthusiastically wanted. Thus, consent communication could be a source of pleasure, taking the form of dirty talk or flirting. Edwards, Rehman and Byers (2022: 2420-21) and Shumlich and Fisher (2020: 1115) also found that consent practice can be pleasurable in itself and increased pleasure can act as an additional reward for good consent practice. Potentially, making sexual communication a priority to improve consent practice and heighten pleasure could be considered a sexual project, a specific objective relating to sexual behaviours (Hirsch & Khan, 2020: 7).

Via ongoing direct conversations about sexual desires and boundaries, as well as learning from previous sexual experiences with that person, over time, the participants developed routines for how they practice consent with their regular sexual partners in the moment. Over time the participants learnt their partners' preferences, boundaries and the specific body language or signals they convey when different sexual experiences are wanted. They then developed habits or routines for consent within

their specific relationship, which resulted in consent communication between partners, which felt efficient and effective. These consent routines could be considered a type of 'interpersonal script', unique to each sexual partnership (Simon & Gagnon, 2002). With these consent routines in place, the participants could navigate consent easily. They described that they could quickly recognise the potentially subtle signals which suggest that their partner does or does not want sex, or wants a particular type of sex, and quickly respond. Equally, their partner could readily recognise these signals in them. Furthermore, over time, due to increased understanding and familiarity, they become increasingly comfortable directly communicating their needs and boundaries with their partners, as the relationship progresses.

In established relationships, initiation and response happen swiftly, with partners picking up on unique signals and reacting almost like a reflex to the subtle signs of wanting or refusal. With these routines in place, consent was more comfortable, and initiation did not need to be as tentative, because they had developed trust and understanding between them. When the consent routines developed by the participants and their partners suited their needs, boundaries and desires, consent was easy and effective. However, if partners developed a routine which was less functional, they would continue to use this poor consent practice out of routine.

Previous research has indicated that consent strategies differ according to relationship type, length and commitment, however, they seem to disagree over the impact of long-term relationships on consent practice. Newstrom, Harris & Miner (2021: 461) found that people in longer-term relationships tend to use more non-verbal or indirect

consent strategies because they know each other better. However, Willis, Murray & Jozkowski (2021: 671-2), the same year, found that people in longer-term relationships use more direct or verbal consent strategies due to increased comfort with each other. The participants in this study who were currently in a long-term sexual relationship, or described previous long-term sexual partners used both verbal and non-verbal forms of consent communication. However, they were unified by their process of creating a routine for consent communication with that specific person, via increased understanding of that person, their signalling and comfort with them. Sexual habitus theory explores how individuals learn from previous experiences to gain a feel for the game of sex, an understanding of how sex is conducted (Grenfell, 2014: 53 O'Toole, 2021:84). Through repeated experiences with the same sexual partner, the participants could develop routines and felt that they could easily understand how sex (and consent) would be conducted with that specific partner.

7 FINDINGS: SUPERORDINATE THEME 3: REFLECTING ON AND EVALUATING NEW INFORMATION AND IDEAS ABOUT CONSENT

7.1 Superordinate Theme 3 Introduction

This third and final findings chapter shall explore Superordinate Theme 3: reflecting on and evaluating new information and ideas about consent. This theme helps to answer the second research sub-question: can engaging with pornography which showcases consent, alongside dedicated space and prompts, allow them to reflect, and influence their prior conceptualisations and practices of sexual consent? As this research question refers to the participants' experiences utilising the sample materials, only data from participants who completed the full process (the first interview, watching the sample materials, the diary study, and the second interview) informs this superordinate theme. This was a total of seven participants, and their details can be found in the methodology section and appendices.

The superordinate theme explored in this chapter relates to the participant's engagement with the sample videos, the reflections they undertook and any potential impacts on their understanding and practice of sexual consent. A full list of the sample videos and content can be found in Appendix 13. The theme showcases how the participants were encouraged to reflect on the nature of consent and their values regarding best consent practices via the study process. The narratives they shared in their diaries and at interviews suggested that they did not passively copy techniques from the sample videos, instead using them as a tool to aid deeper reflection and more fruitful discussion about consent. Furthermore, the participants' increased reflection about the nature of consent did not necessarily translate to a change in behaviour.

The consent practice of the participants in established relationships seemed particularly non-malleable during the process undertaken in this study, perhaps because it had been curated to suit their specific relationship over time.

This superordinate theme can be broken down into five sub-themes. The sub-themes explore how the participants were encouraged via the sample materials and study process to think about how consent might be differently practised. The only thing participants reported porn influencing in their sexual encounters were sex positions, and even these they would not copy passively; they would gain inspiration and then actively decide if it would work for their sexual relationship. When thinking about consent, the participants used the materials as a tool to aid deeper reflection, an explicit example to discuss and bounce ideas off, to prompt thought and conversation, but did not copy communication techniques directly. The participants also considered if their new reflections aided by the study process might impact their future consent practises. Those in established relationships were more resistant to incorporating new ideas about consent communication, whilst those participants who were single or engaging in casual sex, were more open to incorporating new communication strategies in the future.

The five sub-themes are summarised in the table below:

BEING INSPIRED TO TRY NEW THINGS	The participants expressed an interest in trying some of the sex positions and acts shown in the videos. Although they were inspired, they would not copy passively and would critically consider incorporating the acts shown.
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THINKING ABOUT DIFFERENT CONSENT PRACTICES	The participants were encouraged to think about how consent could be differently practised, particularly how verbal consent could be more nuanced and ongoing.
REFLECTING ON, NOT COPYING, CONSENT	The sample videos were utilised by the participants as a tool to aid reflection, rather than a model to copy from directly and passively.
RESISTING NEW APPROACHES	The participants in established relationships expressed that they would not alter their consent practice because the understanding and routines they have developed with their partners are easy to navigate and mutually understood.
THINKING ABOUT FUTURE PRACTICE	The participants who did not have regular sexual partners at the time of the study expressed that they may practise consent differently with a future partner and think about the reflections produced via the study in doing so.

Table 4: Table of the sub-themes within Superordinate Theme 3

The chapter presents each sub-theme individually; with a summary of the nature of the sub-theme followed by an exploration of how it was presented in each participant's data. The chapter closes with a concluding summary of the superordinate theme and how it helps to answer the second research question.

7.2 Sub-theme: Being Inspired to Try New Things

The participants watched, evaluated and commented on the sample videos during the study process. They noted the acts shown, and the consent communication portrayed and highlighted that pornography is a performance, a fantasy. Therefore, when they thought about which (if any) aspects of the videos they might incorporate into their sex lives the unique context of pornography production and its performativity led them to

think critically about the extent to which sex in porn (and thus communication in porn) could reflect sex and consent in real life.

The only aspect of the sample videos and other pornography which the participants reported taking inspiration from were sex positions or sex acts. If they see a sex act or sexual position they find arousing, they may be inspired to try it with their partners. There is a differentiation between inspiration and copying because the participants have agency and were consciously choosing which acts to try or not. Pornography may provide new ideas but the participants considered these critically and decided if the videos showed acts they would like to try; watching pornography did not compel them to passively engage in sex acts shown in the videos. These findings mirrored arguments made by McCormack and Wignall (2017) that consumers of porn did not unconsciously copy things they see in porn, instead they are inspired and actively evaluate what they would like to incorporate into their sex life. This theme was expressed by participants who only took part in the first interview as well as those who completed the process because they could reflect on their engagement with porn prior to the study. Potentially however, as they are university students, the participants are trained critical thinkers and a different cohort of participants may not so readily evaluate or recognise the performativity of pornography. The theme was reflected in the data of nine out of the total 11 participants. This section firstly explains how the participants might be inspired to try new sex acts with their partner and explains how pornography can provide a safe space for the participants to explore their desires and learn more about their sexual selves without involving or risking their relationships.

Henry explained that "without watching porn from a young age, I wouldn't really know anything about sort of like sex positions and stuff like that", thus, pornography has been his only source of information about the logistics of sex. Henry does not feel that he has been inspired to try specific acts from pornography, but rather feels that it has given him a general idea of what the mechanics can be like, "the vague of it". Ellis also described actively looking to porn for practical sex information in the past. They gave an example of a time with a previous partner when they wanted to have penetrative sex standing up so did "quite a lot of research together on Pornhub", to gather logistical, explicit information about how they could make this work for them. They also thought critically about the sex acts shown, as porn is often a fantasy created for "looking good on camera rather than actually being good". Although pornography allowed them to explore and understand sexual acts, they maintained that most sexual knowledge is developed from experience.

For Tim, pornography may provide inspiration for new acts to try with his partner but they would only continue to incorporate them into their own sexual practice if they were enjoyed by the couple (Tim and his partner). Pornography consumption did not compel him to engage in the presented acts but showed him new possibilities, of things to try. "I would say mean we tried reverse cowgirl, but...we didn't like that when we tried it. So that was not one that we carried on with. But I'd definitely say yes, I mean speed bump was one that we use a lot" (Tim). In the diary entries, participants were prompted to note if they were inspired or influenced by any of the sample videos. Videos featuring oral sex and rough sex, (consensually more physically forceful sex which may include aspects of BDSM), inspired him to try those the next time he engaged sexually with his partner.

"I wouldn't say it was copied straight out...I'd watched it in the video and then when I'd had sex that week, I'd thought like, 'oh, that's in my mind'. So I was sort of more leaning towards doing that whilst we were having sex....none of it was new positions, but it might have just been like sort of like inspired by the videos" (Tim).

Here Tim clarified that he did not copy sex acts directly, rather, with "leaning towards" he suggests that he was inspired to do those things. The sample videos did not produce new sexual desires but did influence him to engage more in the acts he enjoys. He described a circular relationship between enjoying an act, wanting to watch it and being inspired to enjoy the act.

Another participant with a long-term partner, Frank, has also used porn as inspiration for new sex acts to try, but other factors will influence whether he takes part in the act with his partner. "I have done that in the past, a certain manoeuvre in the porn video and thought I should try that out or let's see if that actually works in real life" (Frank). He explained that he would investigate if it "actually works in real life", to clarify that he does not directly copy from porn; rather porn provides inspiration. In his diary entries, Frank was also only influenced by the sex acts shown to try those acts with his partner. He described trying the sex positions shown, experimenting with analingus and engaging in rough sex, which they had tried and enjoyed before but were inspired to do again after watching the videos. As Frank's partner also watched the videos, deciding which things to try was a joint decision and the videos prompted a discussion between the couple about the sex acts they wanted to try.

Similarly, John would only engage in sex acts inspired by pornography if his partner was open to it, thus, he may be inspired by porn but would not just copy directly. John explained that he has learnt "positions and stuff from porn" in the past. As an explicit representation of sex, pornography can showcase what sex can entail and look like, the logistics of different sexual experiences (Litsou et al, 2021: 245; Dawson et al, 2022:1257). However, he believes that he would have eventually found out about different sex positions through experience, especially those such as "missionary", which he terms "natural". Sex positions are the only thing John can recall consciously learning about from pornography: "I'm just trying to think if I've seen anything else important, which I actively have tried, but no, I don't really think I have. Probably subconsciously but...". Noting that he may have subconsciously taken things in from pornography, John trails off, unsure. Potentially, he mentions this due to wider cultural discourses about the impact of porn on behaviour. Chima also used pornography in the past as inspiration for new sex positions: "if you see it and you think it could be a good position in real life...if you have a regular partner and you want to try and do something a bit different". He would actively notice and choose to engage in positions shown in pornography, rather than directly copying, critically thinking about whether it would be suitable in "real life" or just as a fantasy, or if it would be enjoyed by his partner.

The participants also reported that watching pornography helped to them understand their own desires and preferences, increasing self-understanding as well as presenting them with ideas of things to try with a partner. Pornography has also allowed John to explore his "threesome fantasy" involving "two guys and a girl mainly, but also two girls and a guy". Through pornography he could explore this fantasy alone without

worrying about his girlfriend or their relationship; it is a low-risk way to explore the fantasy. Whilst porn may inspire him, he would actively consider the experience before deciding to try a new sexual experience. "It would be one I would definitely act out if I was sure that my girlfriend was also fully into it... if it would change the dynamic dynamics between us, or I guess it would also play on my own insecurities... I'd have to properly think about it" (John). John also considered that as most pornography is created as a fantasy, the types of sex acts and consent styles may not be "realistic", or readily incorporated into sexual experiences. He explained that in his own time, he has investigated the "free use" kink via online pornography, "where you both consent beforehand that you can have each other whenever you want", which he thinks would be "pretty hot" to try but he did not think this would be realistic, because "you can't always just have sex whenever you want". For people in the BDSM community, who engage in consensual non-consent kinks such as free use, consent is negotiated explicitly in advance, but they will also use safewords to ensure that activity can be stopped if it is unwanted in the moment (Muehlenhard et al, 2016: 462). Via his own explorations with pornography, John educated himself about how boundaries and consent for these kinks are negotiated in advance.

Chris described using online pornography to explore his desires. He discovered "edging and orgasm denial" via online pornography and decided to try these acts with his partner. He then discovered that whilst he enjoyed it, his partner did not, so they decided not to do it again. This example showcases Chris taking inspiration from pornography, using it to generate new ideas of things to try, but not copying directly. He actively assessed if the act shown should be incorporated into their sex life via trial and communication. He also differentiated between porn and "real life", explaining that

as porn is a fantasy, it would be nonsensical to try to copy it directly. Chris was aware that porn is a performance so critically evaluated which aspects of porn might be usable in his life and which only worked as a performance.

Another participant, Owen, used pornography in the past to understand his own desires. "Watching porn has definitely showed me the kind of things which I find most attractive. So I mean, for example, I really like watching blowjobs. It's kind of just my thing. And usually, in real life, I will propose that" (Owen). It has shown him sexual possibilities and allowed him to explore what his preferences are, and he would then usually act on those preferences (oral) when having sex. With "definitely" he conveyed his certainty of the influence. He did not feel that pornography has made him enjoy oral sex more than he would otherwise, but it has shown him different possibilities and provided a starting point from which to explore his sexual desires with a partner.

7.3 Sub-theme: Thinking About Different Consent Practices

Through the study process, the participants regularly watched the sample pornographic videos which presented explicit examples of what verbal consent may be like during a sexual encounter. They were instructed to watch at least one video per week, but some watched them more often. As explored the first sub-theme, they noted that consent may not function as it does in porn in real life due to the differing contexts. However, they were prompted to think evaluatively about how the videos showed consent communication, via questions in the diaries and the second interview. This theme was reflected in the data of six out of the seven participants who completed the study process.

When prompted, the participants expressed reflections about the nature of consent, how it might be differently conceptualised and how useful these different presentations of consent may be to them. If the participants liked the presentation of consent in a video, they reflected on what made that presentation feel useful or clear; a good example of consent. If they thought consent in a video was poor, this also prompted useful reflections about what made these consent strategies poor and how consent practice could be improved. The reflection occurred regardless of whether the participants thought the sample video showed a good or poor example of consent. They actively used the videos as an explicit tool to bounce ideas off, to help them reflect and rethink how consent might be best understood and practised. As explained in the first superordinate theme, the participants defined consent during sexual experiences as a simple verbal question and answer (akin to the affirmative model) but largely practised it as a nuanced, ongoing and mostly physical communication. Using the sample videos as an explicit example to aid reflection, this incongruence was brought into focus.

One participant, Tim, actively compared the videos to his own sexual activities with his partner, to consider which showed the best consent practice. Video 4 was his favourite because he felt that it most accurately "reflected" his current sexual experiences with his girlfriend. This was the video highlighted most often as the favourite for these same reasons. A summary table of the content of all the sample videos can be found in the appendices. He reflected that consent in this video felt "obvious", repeating this word for emphasis, because they had direct verbal communication about sex, prior to sex.

"I think it was quite obvious in that one 'cause they had obviously verbal talk about it when they were laying there" (Tim). During sexual experiences, Tim and his partner would either use verbal consent directly or rely on non-verbal cues, presenting the two in binary opposition, as the only ways of navigating consent. He described that with his girlfriend, "sometimes it would just be like, oh, you do wanna have sex?. Whereas sometimes it will just be, we'll be laying in bed and we will just start, start sort of kissing each other". He explained that some of the videos followed the second technique which he thought was "okay". He did not conceptualise the more subtle verbal cues in the videos as 'explicit consent' and reflecting on the videos helped him to vocalise this understanding. However, the videos showed him a middle ground between direct verbal consent questioning and only using non-verbal consent: continuous communication during a sexual experience, which was more erotic and used alongside body language. "It was words but not directly what using like, oh, it's not like them saying, oh, do you want to have sex? It's more like them have dirty talking to each other and then leading one thing leading to another" (Tim). As he verbalised his reflections in the second interview, he used detailed descriptions, suggesting he had considered this with greater thought.

Another participant, Frank, also highlighted video 4 as one of the clearest examples of consent. He also liked the presentation of consent in video 8. He explained a differentiation between "explicit" consent which often included a direct question prior to sex, and other videos which felt more "genuine", with more subtle and ongoing consent. Thus, the videos helped to highlight the discrepancy between how he was defining consent in the ideal and how he was practising consent (or what felt like real-life consent practice). "In certain ones, there's just a little sort of, as I say, sort of not a

disclaimer but briefing at the start. Whereas the others showed a sort of appropriate human sort of buildup and more sort of natural consent" (Frank). Frank used the videos to highlight that a single consent event at the start felt less genuine even if it was obvious, whilst continuous consent throughout felt more natural, human, and more believable to watch.

"I feel in some of them there wasn't at any point explicit verbal consent, but I feel like some of those were almost better examples of consent...but the 'endures a rough fucking' video, as I say, there was sort of explicit consent at the start, but then perhaps not great examples of ongoing consent during the actual activity" (Frank).

In contrast, he highlighted video 2 as an example of where explicit verbal consent was established at the start via direct questions and answers, but he felt that the performers looked uncomfortable throughout, so he worried about "exploitation" and there was no continued communication. He compared and contrasted this video to his own rough sex practice with this partner and explained that he would want to practice "ongoing consent", to ensure his "partner is comfortable" throughout the experience.

Frank also discussed the videos with his partner over the study period, which led to "a few quite interesting sort of chats about consent, the nature of consent". Thus, the study process led them to reflect together on how consent might be differently conceptualised and practised. Together they discussed how they were drawn to different titles and had different opinions about which videos showed the best examples of consent, but he did not share specific examples of what they each thought constituted good consent practises, so watching the videos together helped them to

discuss what they each value in consent communication. He also casually discussed the study with some friends in the pub and considered the importance of consent behind the scenes to protect performers, as well as the presentation within the narrative.

Henry also noted a differentiation between direct verbal consent prior to sex (the affirmative model) and more ongoing communication in the videos and reflected that the latter was better. He differentiated between "some points were very obvious and then some things were, I guess more sexy", creating an opposition between these two types of consent communication. He also critiqued some videos for having verbal consent at the start which was not continued throughout and explained that this was poor because consent should be specific to each activity they take part in throughout the experience. He reflected that obvious consent, a direct question at the start, is not always the best example of consent, feeling overly staged and "fake".

"I think he touches her and then goes, is it okay if I touch you? And I'm like, that just seems, that makes it seem fake because obviously, you know, I guess with all these videos there is some kind of consent beforehand. You know, it's sort of assumed, but when they do something and then get consent afterwards, I think that's bad" (Henry).

When the question is stated after a touch has already happened, it appears to Henry that consent has just been asked for show and was not correctly utilised although it was direct.

As pornography is often a fantasy and always a performance, Henry was aware that the consent may be staged for the viewer rather than a communication between those having sex. For Henry, the performative nature of pornography meant that the consent did not feel real or natural. He described some of the consent practices in the videos as "forced and unsexy", thus, although it was direct, the tone made this seem fake and so the consent did not seem genuine. He explained that when the consent was a single question or discussion at the start, without continued communication and agreement throughout, this was uncomfortable and did not feel consensual. He highlighted video 2 as a particularly poor example of consent, "a bit gross", because although it had direct consent communication at the start, it seemed "very forced and very staged and very acty", which made him feel "uncomfortable", repeating synonyms in a list for emphasis. Again, the performative nature of the consent in the video, made him doubt it was a genuine communication between performers and therefore he doubted their consent. The context suggested that agreement could not be taken as true consent, similarly to how consent is complicated in the presence of pressure or coercion, giving consent as a performance may not indicate true agreement. Henry shared at an interview that these values about consent were realised via the study process: "I assume it's something I've always felt, but it's something I sort of realized when I was watching it that didn't feel mega comfortable". Thus, he assumed that he always valued ongoing consent as he believed this to be important. However, via comparison to an explicit resource, he realised how he conceptualised best practices.

Although he did not critique all the videos, John also only considered the examples of consent in the videos to be clear verbal consent if there was a direct verbal question; if they followed the affirmative model. All the videos included in the sample had a

verbal element, but John did not consider the verbal suggestions or utterances of agreement or encouragement to constitute verbal consent. He highlighted two videos, video 4 and video 8, which featured direct questioning at the start, and video 5 featured direct questioning during acts such as "is that okay for you". He "noticed" the "explicit consent" in these videos, and whilst the other videos appeared consensual, he did not notice "any specific consent". Furthermore, he explained that in another video he did not think that verbal consent was explicitly present "but you could tell from how she was talking or reacting that she wanted it too" thus, he did not conceptualise this "talking" which indicated willingness, as verbal consent, because it was not a direct question and answer. He explained his reflections: "in some of the videos, it was a pretty blurred line like it wasn't necessarily clear, there was no consent process other than you could see that both parties, both people want to have sex" (John). He shared his view that unless consent is asked for directly it can be unclear, a "blurred line". However, this juxtaposed his statement that "both parties" were willing, complicating the notion that for consent to be obvious, it needs to be explicitly asked. He went on to differentiate between directly asking for consent, which he termed "explicit", and consent which was not communicated via a direct question and answer, which he termed "implied consent".

"I think the role of consent is the same. Maybe it would be less of the actual talking. 'Do you want to have sex?' 'Yes'. Then we do it. Maybe it'd be more of the just implied. But the actual consent bit would be the same, I think. I don't think there'd be a difference" (John).

He reflected that neither feels "necessarily better than the other", as willingness can be determined from either method, but he prefers consent to be stated directly because this "turns him on" rather than because it is a better method. Thus, using the

sample videos to reflect helped John to vocalise the difference between how he conceptualises ideal, explicit consent, following the affirmative model, and less explicit ongoing consent.

Chris also differentiated between direct verbal consent questioning prior to sex and ongoing consent communication during sexual experiences and thinking about the sample videos helped him to dissect this distinction. Chris explained that "some people are worried that like explicit consent isn't very sexy, but like I think it absolutely can be" and the videos were a "good example" of how consent could be sexy and clear. He reflected, "if you wanted to include verbal consent as part of porn you're making, you know, you could be really, brazen is not the right word, but I dunno, you could just try and overdo it and it would just feel a bit weird and unnatural". In contrast, he felt the presentation of consent in the videos was successful because they were "natural", prompting Chris to reflect on how verbal consent can be sexy and feel natural as part of the overall sexual experience. Like others, he highlighted video 4 as a particularly good example of consent, because it felt "natural". He explained that for consent to feel "sexy" and natural", it "can't be too explicit", but also needs to be "really clear". The video presented a verbal dialogue about consent which was clearly communicated, without directly asking for sex, which might feel awkward.

Chris also actively compared the presentation of consent in the videos to his consent practice, to reflect on his values. Using the videos as a tool for comparing and contrasting, allowed Chris to consider the nuances of best consent practice. He explained that he prefers verbal consent because it can be "clear" and for that

communication to be ongoing "as things continue". The videos showed that ongoing verbal consent practice could be more nuanced and specific, as well as more erotic. He and his partner would rarely ask for sex directly, but they would utilise verbal communication, using clear verbal hints such as "oh, we're alone in the house right now kind of thing. And then it's all very clear". For him and his partner, this verbal hint feels clear and obvious, and they have an assumed mutual understanding that this translates to asking for sex. Thus, reflection utilising the videos, helped Chris to consider how he likes to best communicate consent.

In contrast, Ellis critiqued the videos for not showing enough ongoing communication. Therefore, via a process of comparing and contrasting, they determined that their best consent practice involves continued verbal communication throughout the experience.

"I like it a lot more when there's more fluidity, it's part parts to the next. So the transition between one sexual act and another sexual act...I find it a lot less interesting or a lot worse if there's no if you can't see if it just cuts scene from one to next" (Ellis).

They provided a critique that porn often shows one sex act and then another, without showing the movement and communication in between; they just "cut scene" from one sex act to the next. They noted that they had not reflected on this before, but the study had made them realise the importance of that ongoing communication between different acts within an experience; "which is actually, I think the, in real life, one of the most enjoyable parts about sex". With "actually", Ellis provided a new reflection that the moments of communication, the pauses and adjustments throughout a sexual experience can be the "most enjoyable"; there is pleasure within the continued

communication. They also reflected that the "laughing" and other moments of connection which can occur during a sexual experience, also make the experience "more enjoyable".

International student, Zixin, was the only participant involved in the second interview who, when invited, did not deeply reflect on the nature of consent in the sample videos. He explained that it was "really obvious to understand" that performers had consented to take part in the videos, as they had undergone consent processed behind the scenes. However, when he was asked to talk about the videos, he discussed the sex acts shown and the performers shown but did not have any reflections on the communication. He "couldn't tell in the video" that the acts were consensual, not noticing any communications about consent between the performers in the scene. Potentially, this was due to a language barrier, as all the verbal communication in the sample videos was in Zixin's second language and there were some communication issues in the interviews. Zixin shared that he watched porn videos frequently prior to the study, suggesting that he is comfortable with pornography but perhaps his porn literacy (a skill taught in sex education to understand porn as fantasy and untangle the potentially harmful or misogynistic messaging within mainstream porn) was lower than the other participants, which made it harder for him to explore the communication shown. Furthermore, Zixin was engaging with a different set of cultural norms regarding consent to the other participants. It was unclear at interview whether Zixin was resistant to thinking about different ways of communicating consent, or if he did not notice or comprehend the examples of communication in the sample videos.

7.4 Sub-theme: Reflecting On, Not Copying, Consent

The previous sub-theme has explored how the participants utilised the sample videos as a tool for the purposes of reflection to consider how consent might be differently communicated and which types of communication they think are most valuable. The videos provided an explicit demonstration of how consent could be conducted, which the participants then actively used to compare and contrast the different presentations of consent, to reflect on their values and priorities regarding consent and to consider what they believe to be best practice.

However, the participants' consent communication was not passively influenced by the sample videos. They did not dwell on the videos without being prompted to do so over the study period, only providing reflections once they were prompted. They also did not directly copy the communication styles shown. This is consistent with other literature in the field, which shows that viewers do not copy directly or passively from pornography; watching a specific type of porn will not cause viewers to immediately behave in the way shown (McCormack and Wignall, 2017: 979). As explained in the first sub-theme, the participants understood porn as a performance so critically considered which aspects of porn might relate to sex in real life and which do not. As they were not copying directly, they reflected on the videos they considered to show good consent practice and those they considered to show poor consent practice, using both as a tool to think about the nuances of consent, without passively copying from either. This theme was expressed by six of the seven participants who completed the study process.

Henry explained that if he were watching pornography outside of the study and saw something he did not like he would "turn it off and move on", however, due to the study environment, he thought more deeply about what he did not like and why these disliked videos conflicted with his values. In the second interview, he shared opinions and reflections when prompted to do so.

"I don't think it is something I particularly think about and also it's not really, something, a part of porn I necessarily engage with on in my personal time. When I'm doing the study and I'm thinking about it. It's something I definitely thought about while I was watching the videos. But yeah, if I'm going to be watching, when I watch porn in the future, I won't be thinking oh what's specifically happening with consent here" (Henry).

Although he does not usually notice the presentation of consent in pornography he watches in his "personal time", he is certain that he "definitely thought" about consent in the sample videos due to the context of the study. Incorporating the videos into a wider programme of reflection about consent led him to actively think about consent in that context, but he would not think about it whilst passively watching. Thus, he would not passively copy the content of the videos, instead, actively analysing their content.

Another participant, Frank, watched the sample videos both for pleasure and to actively consider their content as part of the study process. He sometimes had "them on in the background" during his "day-to-day life", in which case, he was watching them purely to think about them for the study. He wanted to "have them in my head" to think about them more frequently, due to the study context. He "engaged with them

more than I might engage with typical sort of pornographic material... it's fair to say they've all sort of stuck in my brain" (Frank). Therefore, the study provided a context for active engagement with the sample videos and active reflection on the nature of consent, which Frank would not have experienced if he was passively watching pornographic films which featured consent.

Similarly, due to the study environment, Ellis did think about how consent was presented in the videos after watching them, however, they would not copy the techniques shown. "Purely because it was part of the study and I was trying to reflect on it a little bit. The reflection was that there wasn't an awful lot" (Ellis). As they were watching the sample videos as part of a research project, rather than passively consuming them, they actively tried to think about the videos and reflect. They decided that the standard of consent shown in the videos was poor, but this reflection was still useful because it highlighted to Ellis the importance of explicit consent communication in their own sexual experiences and consolidated their values regarding consent.

7.5 Sub-theme: Resisting New Approaches

The participants utilised the sample materials and the study process, as a tool to deeply reflect on and evaluate their conceptualisations of consent, to consider how they might best communicate consent and their values regarding sexual consent. However, this process of deeper evaluation did not necessarily translate to a change in practise over the study period or a conscious intention to change consent communication strategies in the future. Out of the seven participants who completed the study process, three (John, Tim, Frank) were in long-term sexual relationships.

These participants reflected on consent during the study but then decided they would not alter the way they communicated consent with their partners. This was because they had established a mutually understood routine for consent, based on a deep understanding of each other's nuanced and subtle signs and signals, which was efficient and enjoyable. This was explored in the second superordinate theme. Thus, these learnt behaviours of consent, developed over time via repeated experiences, were less malleable and they were more resistant to changing their consent communication.

John, who was in a long-term, long-distance relationship with his girlfriend whom he saw once per week, explained that the presentation of consent in the sample videos did not influence his behaviour because he had an established routine with his partner. He liked that he and his partner discussed consent explicitly and directly and although he saw that verbal consent could be less direct and yet still obvious in the videos, he decided that for him and his partner their established "pattern" should remain. Despite this new evaluation of how consent might be practised differently, he was resistant to any change in his consent communication with his partner. "As I've described to you before, my girlfriend and I are also pretty explicit about it, so, it's not like, it wasn't anything new" (John). He gave more attention to the videos which seemed to reflect how he likes to practise consent. Although these did not teach him "anything new", they led him to reflect and decide that their explicit verbal communication, was the best way for them to practise consent. He noted that potentially: "the whole flow of things from starting and foreplay and sex, it would like flow very nicely if you didn't explicitly ask. But at the same time, I do like asking. I do like to know explicitly if she wants it" (John). Thus, he considered different modes of consent communication using the

videos as a tool for comparison, before deciding that he valued his specific practice with his partner. However, as he seems to state the merits of both explicit and less explicit communication here, there is a chance that his final assurance of valuing explicit consent is an example of social desirability bias in John's response. He "didn't feel any of the videos have any effect" and "haven't really thought, like seen, anything where I thought, yeah, I want to try that". Thus, the videos prompted him to think about his values regarding consent, but he determined that his current routine with his partner suited them best and his practice was not altered.

Tim, who had been with his girlfriend for 18 months, concurred that the study "hasn't changed the way I've, we had sex in the last few weeks", so there was no conscious change in his behaviours with his partner due to participation. He explained that during the study period, as before, their communication would follow a routine which was "not identical every time" but was the "same sort of thing"; gradually navigated through continued exchange of physical signs of initiation and reciprocation, following mutually understood signs and signals of willingness.

Frank had been with his partner for the longest and the couple were cohabiting. His consent practices with his partner, as noted in the diary entries, were consistent across the six-week period, unchanged by the study process. In the second interview, he reflected that if he had a different partner in the future, his consent practice might change to better suit that person and relationship, but with his current partner, consent practice would not change. Thus, he understood his consent practice as specific to the

relationship, the dynamic between them and their nuanced and specific communication and signals.

"I think because I've been in a long relationship, we don't necessarily actively think about consent as often cause it just sort of is, we just sort of know how it works" (Frank).

As they had learnt about each other from experience, Frank felt that consent was easy to understand and navigate between them. They "just sort of know", they have an unconscious understanding of each other. He reflected that in "newer relationships" consent needs to be navigated more carefully because that new person is less well known so he would need to consciously, actively and more directly communicate about consent with "ongoing consideration". Furthermore, if in future he were to have a more "BDSM-y" or "kink style" of relationship "consent would have to play a more significant role", it would need to be communicated more directly. Therefore, Frank considered how consent may be differently practised in different contexts, but in his current relationship, he would follow the established and mutually understood routine he shares with his partner.

7.6 Sub-theme: Thinking About Future Practice

The participants who completed the study process and underwent a process of reflection regarding consent over the study period but did not have a current regular sexual partner were more open to thinking about using different consent communication strategies with future partners. Ellis, Chris and Henry reflected on the nature of consent and then considered if they would utilise any new consent strategies in future sexual relationships. Thus, their practice of consent was potentially more

malleable and they were less resistant to potentially changing their consent practice than those participants with long-term partners.

Chris had been in a relationship which ended prior to his involvement in the study. In the second interview, he thought about how he might want to navigate consent when he starts dating again and having sexual experiences with new people. He noted that his favourite sample video, video 4, demonstrated a "connection" between the actors. He explained that this was the "vibe" he would like to "cultivate with future partners". He was drawn to the atmosphere created between them due to their ongoing communication. Furthermore, the video prompted him to consider the types of sexual experiences he would like. Prior to the study he was "seeking casual sex" after his long-term relationship recently ended. However, the study process helped him to realise that connection and communication would lead to sexual experiences which are "going to be better". Thus, the study "prompted that kind of evaluation on things".

Henry, who also did not have a current partner but had experienced previous sexual relationships, was prompted to consider how consent might feature in all his relationships rather than just sexual relationships. He explained in the second interview that the study has made him think about and value consent more frequently in his daily life.

"I think in my general life I have been thinking about consent more, definitely. But obviously not in a sexual context. But like it does make me think, you know, it's been making me think sort of, if I'm going to hug somebody or something,

does this person feel comfortable with it, I guess, that has, I think definitely leaked into my brain, so to speak". (Henry)

The study prompted him to think about his non-sexual encounters, such as hugging friends, and the importance of consent. With "definitely", Henry expressed confidence in the impact of the study process and "make me think" indicated that these were new thoughts and priorities. Therefore, via a process of reflection during the study period and aided by the sample materials, Henry considered new priorities regarding consent practice.

Ellis, who engaged in casual sex but did not have a regular partner, explained that the study process prompted them to think more deeply about consent and how it might be differently navigated. However, they decided that they did not like the presentation of consent in the videos because it did not feel explicit enough and thus, in future sexual experiences they would want to use more direct verbal consent. They said that their:

"consent practices are significantly more over the top and better than in the videos. And even if the videos might indicate that I don't need to be as in-depth with consent, I still don't feel comfortable not to be. So I think it didn't change my own practices, but the reflection was there because the study exists and I was interested in the study" (Ellis)

Thus, the study process prompted them to reflect on the nature of consent and to evaluate the different ways consent could be communicated. They explained that any time they have sex they want to be receiving continuous verbal or obvious non-verbal signs, such as "a smile or a nod" which indicate agreement, "rather than just lack of

saying no". Therefore, in future sexual experiences, they would continue to use direct consent communication strategies.

7.7 Superordinate Theme 3 Summary

Over the course of the six-week diary study and during the second interview, the participants were invited to use the sample porn videos to reflect on how they understood and practised consent. When encouraged and prompted by questions in the diary or the second interview, the participants engaged in deep reflection about how consent was presented in the different videos and their own experiences. They considered which they thought showed consent well and which they thought were poor and how the videos may or may not reflect their own consent practice. The explicit nature of the videos helped to ground thoughts and reflections on consent in a sexual context. The participants' reflections utilising the sample videos also highlighted the difference between how they conceptualised consent and what consent practice looked like in their experiences. It led the participants to voice and consider how they define ideal consent (as a single direct communication directly prior to sex) and what they think effective consent communication looks like in real-world practice (as nuanced and ongoing throughout a sexual experience using a mixture of verbal and non-verbal hints and suggestions).

However, whether their deeper reflections about consent communication may impact their consent practice was dependent on whether they had a current regular sexual partner. The participants who took part in the second interview who were also in current, longer-term relationships, expressed that they understood from their

reflections on the videos that consent might be practised differently but they would not change their current practice with their partner. They had current consent routines with their partners which were not readily malleable as they were based on repeated experiences and a deeper understanding of each other's unique signs, signals, boundaries and needs. Therefore, their practice was not altered as a result of the reflections prompted by the study. Yet, the participants who did not have a current regular sexual partner and so did not currently have a consent routine expressed that due to the new reflections prompted by the study, they might practice consent differently with a future partner. Thus, they have a greater potential to practice consent differently in future because their understanding of consent is not tied to the context of a specific sexual relationship, but further research would be required to confirm this.

Previous studies have also utilised pornography in their methodologies to help understand participants' values regarding consent (Dawson, 2020:306; McKee et al, 2020: 1). Pornography can help to produce knowledge, such as in this study, whereby engagement and reflection with porn helped to deepen thought about consent; this can be used as a defence of an otherwise controversial social object (Mikkola, 2019: 124). Whilst sex education and consent education programmes for teenagers and young adults can be theoretical, pornography is explicit and can be useful to directly show what sex can look like (Philpott, Singh and Gamlin, 2017: 107; Oosterhoff et al, 2016; Litsou et al, 2021: 236; Dawson et al, 2022:1257; Albury, 2014: 172; Weinberg et al, 2010: 1390). The present study used pornography as an explicit demonstration of what consent could look like in the context of a (hetero)sexual experience, to help prompt reflection about consent grounded in an explicit context of sexual behaviour.

Regardless of whether the participants valued the presentation of consent in the videos or not (whether they thought it was good or poor), they were prompted to reflect and consider how consent *might* be differently conceptualised, and they actively engaged with the material. Although the videos were specifically selected as they portrayed explicit consent, potentially any videos could have been used because the participants did not take passive, direct inspiration from the videos or use them as a template to guide their understanding of how consent should always be done. Instead, they used them as an explicit example to bounce ideas off and reflect on the nature of consent communication. Potentially, images, vignettes, movie clips, or stories, showing consent communication considered good and poor, could have been used to fulfil a similar function; as an explicit example as a starting point for reflection. The participants did not reflect when watching the videos passively; it was the study environment and questions which prompted their evaluation rather than engagement with the videos alone. Their narratives about previous experiences with porn also showed that, generally, they do not copy communication or different manners of having sex from porn. This finding was consistent with work by McCormack and Wignall (2017: 979) who found that individuals do not copy directly or passively from pornography, instead, they take some inspiration and incorporate this with learning from experience. The participants in this study were aware that pornography is a fantasy, a fictional narrative. Therefore, they engaged critically with the material and used it to reflect.

8 DISCUSSION

8.1 Discussion Introduction

This research sought to understand how the participants, young men who have sex with women, who are also students at a UK university, understand what is meant by sexual consent, how they conceptualise ideal sexual consent practice, how this compares to their communication of consent with their sexual partners, and how malleable their understanding and practice of consent might be when they are given the tools, space and prompts to reflect.

The research was guided by the research question:

How is sexual consent conceptualised, practised and influenced by young men who have sex with women?

Within this overarching question, the study investigated two sub-questions:

- 1. How do young men who have sex with women conceptualise and practice sexual consent?*
- 2. Can engaging with pornography which showcases consent, alongside dedicated space and prompts, allow them to reflect, and influence their prior conceptualisations and practices of sexual consent?*

A small group of participants, all self-identifying as part of the group: men, aged 18-25, who have sex with women, who were students at a selected UK university, took part in the IPA research process. This involved an initial interview, receipt of sample

pornographic videos which demonstrate explicit consent, six weeks of diaries, and a follow-up interview. 11 participants took part in the first interview, out of which, seven completed the full research process. This provided a total data set of 18 interviews, each 45 minutes to an hour in length, and 26 diary entries. The data were closely analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis techniques. The superordinate themes formed from the analysis process have been detailed and explored in the previous findings chapters.

Three superordinate themes were created:

Superordinate theme 1: PHYSICAL CONSENT COMMUNICATION DURING SEXUAL EXPERIENCES

Superordinate theme 2: TALKING AND UNDERSTANDING BEYOND SEXUAL EXPERIENCES

Superordinate theme 3: REFLECTING ON AND EVALUATING NEW INFORMATION AND IDEAS ABOUT CONSENT

Superordinate themes one and two speak to the first research sub-question and explain how the participants understood consent as a concept and how they communicated consent with their sexual partners. Meanwhile, superordinate theme three answers the third research sub-question about how the participants engaged in reflection about consent as mediated by the study methodology.

This chapter explores how the findings can be unpacked, understood and explained via previous research in the field and explains how the superordinate themes and theoretical perspectives answer the research questions. The chapter explains how the data led to the creation of a new theory of consent communication: Coordinated Management of Consent (CMC). It is vital to note that CMC is not presented as an ideal or recommended way of communicating consent, instead the theory presents the mechanics of how the study participants communicated consent. The findings confirm that although the participants frequently conceptualised consent as following the affirmative model, in contrast, their communication behaviours followed CMC.

Using CMC theory and previous research in the field, the first and second superordinate themes are unpacked to answer the first research sub-question. The chapter then explores how the second sub-question can be answered using the third superordinate theme, theory and previous research. The chapter finally explains how this research expands, develops and challenges established ideas about consent in the field. It will then consider the implications for further research and policy.

8.2 Addressing the Research Question: How Do Young Men Who Have Sex with Women Conceptualise and Practice Sexual Consent?

The first two superordinate themes address how the participants conceptualised and practised consent and therefore answer the first research sub-question. A summary table of the sub-themes within the first and second superordinate themes can be found in Appendix 1.

Consistent with other studies in the field, the data showed an incongruence between how the participants conceptualised ideal, explicit consent and how they practised consent with their sexual partners (Graf and Johnson, 2021; Goodcase, Spencer & Toews, 2021; Shumlich & Fisher, 2020). Most participants' understandings of ideal consent followed the simple affirmative model, conceptualised as a direct, preferably verbal, question and 'yes' in response; a transaction directly prior to sex (Graf and Johnson, 2021; Setty, 2021). The participants largely gave the affirmative model definition as their ideal because it was how they described what they thought consent is 'supposed to be'. Although they did not follow their ideal in practice, and their described behaviours did not often follow this model, they still thought of it as the ideal in theory. Alternatively, some participants discussed the importance of noticing and respecting clear signs of refusal, a stance often referred to as 'no means no' in consent campaigns and now out of favour in preference of the affirmative model, often termed 'yes means yes'. This understanding of consent as an absence of a direct 'no' has also been found by other studies (Graf and Johnson, 2021; Muehlenhard et al, 2016).

Both 'no means no' and 'yes means yes' conceptualisations can be problematic because they can portray consent as an object to be obtained from another person and treat sex as a single act rather than an evolving experience made up of a series of acts (as sex was described by the participants). Although this type of questioning is direct and intended to be explicit, it can ask questions which are too broad such as "would you like to have sex", which is unintentionally not explicit, without nuance and is not ongoing throughout an evolving sexual experience. Indeed, Hills et al (2021; 248) also argue that consent needs to be an ongoing process because activities change throughout a sexual experience. Although the participants conceptualised

ideal consent practice as largely verbal, direct and yet potentially transactional, they did not often practice consent in these ways. Instead, their consent practice was mostly non-verbal but involved ongoing, nuanced communication between the involved parties.

Furthermore, the participants mostly engaged in physical, less verbal, consent communication during sexual experiences. Participants felt that this physical communication of consent was most often practised successfully and allowed for nuanced, specific and ongoing communication throughout a changing sexual experience. They could notice changes in body language, arousal and reciprocation throughout an experience, often looking for multiple, compounding signals to physically indicate consent. They could note physical signs of willingness as an experience developed and different acts were introduced to ensure ongoing consent as sex progressed between increasingly intimate 'stages'. Consent was a reciprocal, to-ing and fro-ing, physical communication. Physical signals could be consciously used to ask for consent for a specific act and physical signals were used to give or revoke consent for specific acts, as the experience progressed. However, this communication process was not always conscious or purposeful; sometimes they felt willingness as a tone or atmosphere, without giving conscious attention to the different signals. When consent was ongoing, mutually practised by the participants and their sexual partners and specific to each element of the sexual experience, the communication felt easier to understand and navigate, regardless of whether that communication was verbal or non-verbal.

The participants sometimes, but less frequently, used verbal consent communication strategies during their sexual experiences. Participants expressed that asking verbally could feel awkward, as found by previous studies, so they mostly only used this with a partner with whom they felt highly comfortable (Willis et al, 2020:53). If they did utilise verbal consent, they often only asked for consent after determining consent via non-verbal signals first; asking verbally to double-check. This was a more gradual and tentative approach. Other studies have also found that asking for consent directly or out of the blue, without warning or any prior physical signs, might be considered off-putting or inappropriate (Shumlich & Fisher, 2020: 1115; Edwards, Rehman and Byers, 2022: 2417). Verbal communication in the moment was often made up of hints and suggestions, rather than direct questions, or could be erotic in itself, taking the form of dirty talk.

The findings of this thesis represent interpretations based on the participants' accounts of their subjective experiences and how they chose to narrate those experiences for the researcher. It cannot be known from the data gathered what objectively happened during their sexual experiences, just what the participants perceived to have happened, how they felt and how they believe they behaved.

8.3 Communication using Coordinated Management of Consent (CMC)

Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM), as theorised by Pearce (2005) explains communication (general communication not sexual communication) as moving between people, in a cycle of interpretation and action, which flows between communicators. Interpretation and action are then influenced by different contexts

existing on various levels, such as the relationship between the communicators, what they are communicating about, the culture where they are communicating, and their self-concepts (Pearce, 2005). These contexts interact with each other to produce unique experiences of interpreting meaning and performing communication acts (Pearce, 2005).

I have uniquely applied CMM theory to the participants' consent practice and termed this new way of understanding consent communication, Coordinated Management of Consent (CMC). Pearce's (2005) CMM is a useful theory through which to describe and explain how the participants in the present study practised consent during sexual experiences because consent practice is a form of communication. In addition, the CMM theory of communication mapped neatly onto how the study participants engaged in consent communication during sexual experiences. As presented in CMM, the participants' communication of consent in the moment, albeit mostly non-verbal, involved an ongoing process of interpretation and action, which was impacted by context. It should be noted that CMM usually requires engagement with everyone engaging in the communication to understand and explore how communication flows between them. Thus, CMC theory as presented here, explores the participants' subjective experiences of communication with their partners and further research would be required to understand if/how CMC functions with couples or groups. The nuances of CMC theory as it is developed from and applies to the participants' subjective experiences and how it is supported by the participants' data are presented below.

8.4 Physical Consent Communication as A Cycle of Interpretation and Action

The participants navigated consent throughout sexual experiences as a to-ing and fro-ing continuous communication following the model of communication outlined in CMM theory (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009: 2). This two-way, mutual, ongoing communication involved the participants continuously noticing and interpreting their partner's signals as indicators of consent or non-consent (perceiving signs) and then performing actions to show their own consent, suggest further sexual acts, or indicate their discomfort (performing signs) (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009: 2). Their communication was an ongoing cycle throughout sexual experiences. Participants would continuously interpret, act, interpret, act, and so forth, as a sexual experience developed. I have termed these cycles of ongoing communication: Coordinated Management of Consent (CMC) cycles.

Superordinate theme one summarises how the participants would interpret their partner's physical signals and then perform signals to communicate back to them. The participants used more non-verbal consent strategies with their sexual partners, felt willingness or discomfort as an atmosphere and used physical gestures to physically ask for and give consent. For example, they might make a tentative move towards a sex act and then look for signs of approval to continue. Furthermore, sex is largely a physical, embodied experience, so consent was practised in the moment as an embodied experience. The participants' consent practice consisted of ongoing physical signs, hints and suggestions, which were performed and interpreted throughout a sexual experience, and navigated utilising a shared understanding of the meaning of different signals.

Thus, consent was negotiated and renegotiated throughout evolving sexual acts via a shared responsibility for sexual partners to continuously check in on each other. Although this communication was mostly non-verbal, it was nuanced and specific as the sexual experience developed. Sex is not a singular act, instead, a sexual experience is a series of acts which develop, escalate and change; the participants themselves described sex in this way. Therefore, communication to determine consent needs to be ongoing, rather than a single communication act, to ensure agreement to take part remains as the activities evolve.

8.4.1 Interpretation:

CMM theory explains that throughout communications, individuals “assign meaning”; to interpret the other person’s communication (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009: 3). The process of interpretation is guided by “rules” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009: 3). These rules are mediated by an array of contextual factors, assumptions and norms (Swords et al, 2014: 1385). “Rules of meaning”, are used to interpret the meaning of signals or communications, they are used to interpret tone and body language; for example, to differentiate between a smile of pleasure and a smirk of displeasure (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009: 3). CMC involves the use of rules to assign meaning to the interpretation of consent communication signals during sex.

The participants expressed personal rules, learnt from experience, wider social norms or their understanding of their partner, which guided how they actively interpreted their sexual partners’ largely non-verbal communications as indicative of consent or non-

consent. They would actively interpret signals given out by their sexual partners such as their body language, tone, energy, reciprocation, suggestions and hints, as indicators of willingness or discomfort. They also described feeling consent as an atmosphere, intuitively knowing when their partner's body language shifted to be more agreeable or more reluctant, via less conscious interpretation. Via interpreting their partner's physical signals and communication, they would determine if their partner was enjoying the current act, was uncomfortable or wanted to stop, or if their partner would want, or be receptive to, the introduction of a new act.

8.4.2 Taking Action:

After interpreting their partner's physical signals as suggesting a desire to continue the current act, stop, or introduce a new act, the participants would take action. This was the next stage in the CMC cycle. They would perform a physical action or use a physical signal to communicate with their partner (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009: 3). They would perform communicative actions such as: tentatively suggesting new acts using physical hints, continuing the current act, or stopping the act to check in with their partner more directly and evaluate consent.

"Rules of action" set out the expected pattern of actions in response to interpreted signals, in CMM theory (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009: 3). Littlejohn and Foss (2009: 3) give the example that "when someone smiles, the other person should smile back". A common rule of action utilised by the participants throughout sexual experiences was reciprocation. If they consented, they would mirror their partner's action to signal their consent. Other rules of action were: if they interpreted their partner's signals as an

indication of willingness, they would continue the sex act or use physical hints to suggest further acts, but if they interpreted their partner's signals as indicating discomfort, they would pause, slow down or check in. "Given a particular state of affairs, a certain meaning and/or action feels logically right... if a person perceives that a smile means pleasure, that person feels that it is right to smile back", thus to continue or stop sexual activity according to their interpretation of their partner's signals and resultant perception of their partner's comfort, feels "logically" and ethically, "right" (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009: 3). The diagram below presents the CMC cycle of interpretation and action used to communicate about consent during sexual experiences.

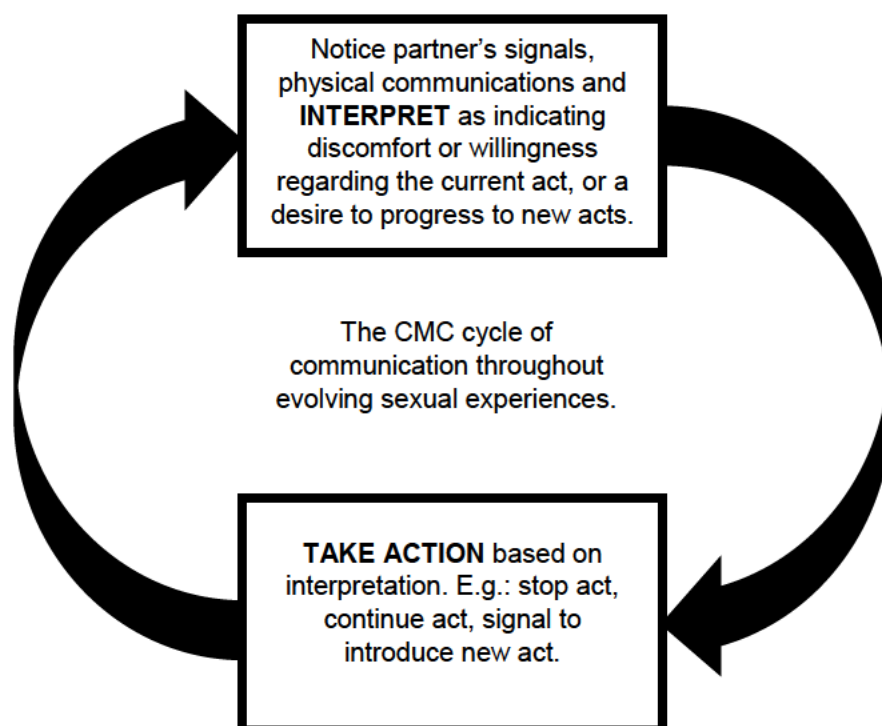


Figure 5: Diagram depicting the CMC cycle

8.4.3 CMC Cycles and the "Stages" Of Sex:

The participants were communicating physically throughout sexual experiences as they developed, following a CMC cycle. This communication was sometimes active,

conscious and purposeful, and sometimes unconscious, leading the participants to feel consent or non-consent as an atmosphere.

However, communication was most purposeful in the liminal spaces between sex acts. As highlighted in the first superordinate theme, the participants described sex as a series of stages and would actively communicate between stages to tentatively understand if their partner wanted to progress to the next stage; from lower to higher order acts (Willis et al, 2020). This required either a shared understanding of the typical stages of sex, following wider cultural norms about heterosexual encounters, or clear communication regarding the desired next stage.

When in this liminal space, and consciously wanting to move on, participants would actively interpret their partner's physical communications to determine if they would be receptive to the initiation of a new sex act. They would then perform a physical signal to suggest that new act, to suggest moving on to the next stage. Another process of interpretation would then take place, to determine if their partner accepted the initiation. Here the participants noted looking for signals as indicative of consent, such as body language showing willingness or reciprocation. The following action would be to carry out the new sexual activity.

Many of the participants shared feelings of sexual anxiety in their interviews. For some, a little low-level worry was useful, because it manifested as a desire to be sure of their partner's consent as they were worried about interpreting incorrectly. When interpreting consciously in the liminal spaces between sex acts, worry or uncertainty

could be a signal that they need to check in with their partner to be sure of their consent, or slow down and check for more signals to be sure they are correctly interpreting their partner's consent. However, for others, anxiety about sex caused them a large amount of distress which negatively impacted their general wellbeing and mental health. At interview, a number of participants disclosed sexual worry unprompted, which could manifest as serious anxiety or sexual dysfunction. Their worries were related to sex and relationships generally, as well as consent specifically, often rooted in masculine pressures to both lead sexual experiences and to be the one to ensure consent, due to assumptions that consent is always asked by men of women (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013; Willis et al, 2019: 60; Rollero & Roccato, 2023).

8.5 The CMC Cycle of Physical Consent Communication Is Influenced by Layers of Context.

CMM theory explains that communication is impacted by layers of context which also interplay and impact each other (Pearce, 2005). Similarly, amongst the participants, the CMC cycle was influenced by layers of context, such as assumptions about gender roles, norms of heterosexual encounters, as well as an understanding of their specific sexual partner and their relationship. These layers of context impacted how the participants interpreted their partner's physical signals; and what they understood different signs to mean. The layers of context also influenced the actions they took, what felt appropriate and how the communication should be performed. Thus, "rules of meaning" and "rules of action" were impacted by context (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009: 3).

Swords et al (2014) also used a CMM model to unpack young men's sexual communication, to understand how they communicated their sexual experiences, and the layers of context which influenced their experiences and how they told their stories, showing how CMM could be applied to sexual communication (Swords et al, 2014: 1391-2). They found that "men's memorable sexual experiences" were influenced by "larger frames of cultural masculinity"; what they interpreted as masculine behaviour influenced how they behaved during their experience and how they communicated that narrative (Swords et al, 2014: 1391-2). They considered how the communication was impacted by wider cultural archetypes, "life script" (self-concept), the relationship between those engaging sexually, and the nature of that sexual experience (Swords et al, 2014: 1388). Swords et al's (2014) study used CMM to consider how their participants communicated sexual narratives (on all topics not just consent) after the fact, whereas I am applying CMM theory to how my participants communicated with their partners during sexual experiences, and about consent specifically. In CMM theory, the communication act is often termed the "speech act", because verbal communication is being addressed (Swords et al, 2014: 1388). The communication acts (within the CMC cycle) addressed in this study were mostly physical but followed the same processes and influences.

In the context of sexual consent communication within the present study, the participants' experiences were similarly mediated by ideals and pressures associated with masculinity and sexual behaviour. Contextual factors relating to wider sexual norms, understanding of the specific sexual relationship and self-concept all impacted the participants' consent communication and interplayed and impacted each other

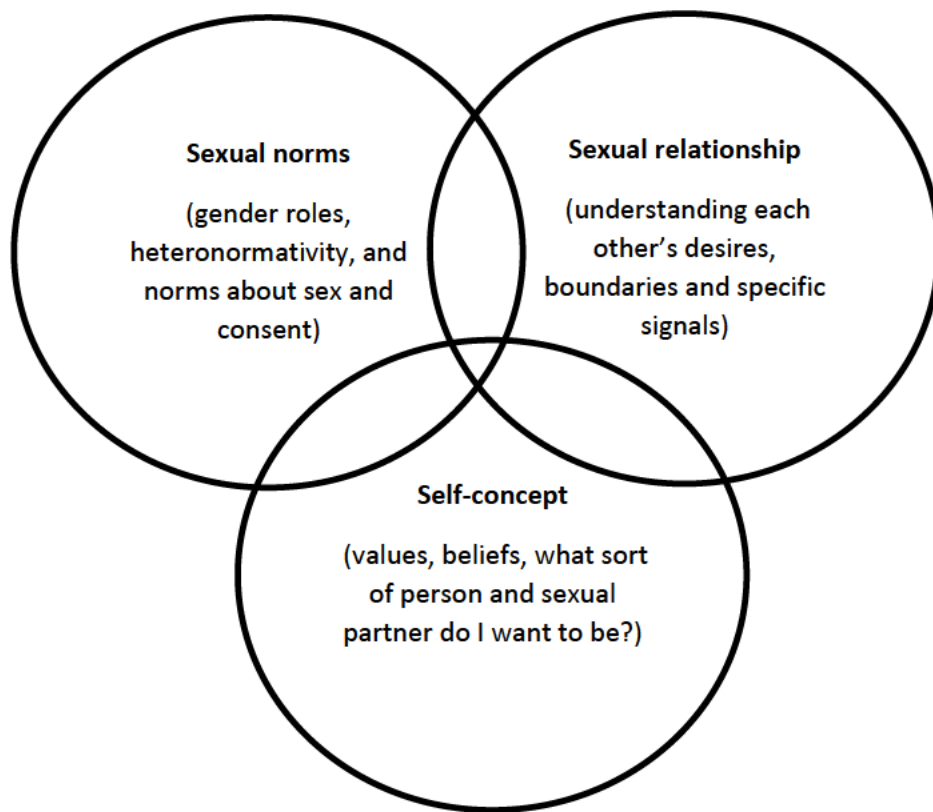


Figure 6: Diagram depicting the layers of intersecting context impacting CMC

Contexts relating to sexual norms include factors external to those individuals having sex, but that influence them, such as wider social expectations relating to gender and heterosexual dynamics. These norms could be learnt from previous experiences, media, peers, family and wider society. Contexts relating to the specific sexual relationship and the specific individuals involved also impacted consent communication. These might include whether they are long-term partners, dating, having casual sex or a hook-up, as well as their personal sexual desires such as the type of sex they are having with each other and their understanding of each other as sexual partners and individuals. Context relating to the relationship was learnt via communication with each other, a deeper understanding of one's own desires, boundaries and behaviours and a deeper understanding of one's partner's desires,

boundaries and behaviours. Participants also shared their own values and beliefs regarding consent and their self-concept. Some identified people they know who disregarded consent and wanted to distance themselves from those people, or expressed anxiety about consent, whilst others were nonchalant or confident about consent. For the study participants, their self-concept as a sexual partner, their relationship with the person they are having sex with and their understanding of that person, as well as the need to navigate and sometimes unpack sexual norms, all had a complex influence on how they communicated consent. Through the double-hermeneutic IPA process, I could explore and interrogate the participants' self-understanding, reflect upon their reflections and consider how it guided their behaviour in different circumstances over time (in an idiographic manner as required for IPA studies).

8.5.1 The Impact of Context on Coordination In CMC:

According to CMM theory, communication is successful when the communicators are coordinated. Communication is coordinated when individuals accurately interpret each other's signals and perform actions which the other person can readily understand. Littlejohn and Foss (2009: 5) explain that throughout communication "each is privately asking the question, what does this action mean, and how should I respond? If successful, the participants will feel that their interaction is coordinated or that it has some kind of logical pattern to it". Contextual factors impacted how the participants interpreted signals and performed communication acts during the physical CMC cycle. These contextual factors could make them more coordinated or less coordinated with their partner, making physical consent communication via CMC feel easier or more difficult.

“A lack of coordination occurs when communicators cannot seem to mesh their actions in a meaningful way”, they each believe that their own interpretations and actions are logical but cannot see the logic in their partner’s communication because they lack a shared understanding of the meaning (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009: 5). When communication between the participants and their sexual partners was uncoordinated, they described following a pattern of interpretation and action but were not necessarily accurately interpreting their partner or performing appropriate actions. Thus, incoordination could lead to the inaccurate interpretation of their partner’s signals, so they could not correctly determine consent or non-consent. If they felt uncoordinated, they would stop or pause or check in or might uncomfortably continue.

If the study participants did not have a good understanding of what their specific sexual partner wanted or did not want during sexual experiences, or the specific physical signals they would use to communicate, they would need to navigate consent using more assumptions. These assumptions would form the “rules” which guide interpretation and action throughout the CMC cycle (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009: 3). As assumptions are derived from wider stereotypes and norms rather than the specific person they are with, sometimes those assumptions can be incorrect and lead to incoordination. Physical consent practice was less coordinated for the participants when assumptions about what signals mean and how to respond, were made based on gendered stereotypes or norms of heterosexual dynamics, as found in other studies (Willis et al, 2019; Setty, 2023).

Assumptions relating to gender norms and stereotypes were particularly influential for the study participants. They experienced the impact of stereotypes about men and sexual behaviour, when their partners inaccurately interpreted their signalling. For example, participants shared experiences of when their partners believed the stereotype that young men always want sex, so would inaccurately assume that their consent was always given, leading to the inaccurate interpretation of their physical signalling if they were signalling discomfort or refusal.

When participants instead prioritised understanding their specific sexual partner's desires and boundaries and the unique physical signs they exhibit during sex, they could better understand what their partner did and did not want sexually, and the signals they used to communicate consent. Thus, they were less often having to rely on assumptions derived from sexual norms. Their ability or desire to better understand and prioritise their partner in this way was also influenced by their self-concept, as the different contextual factors interplay. They would need to respect and want to better understand their partner and feel confident in themselves to do so. This led to the participants feeling like they were making more accurate interpretations of their partner's signals and taking more appropriate actions; they were more in sync and their CMC cycles were more coordinated. Therefore, their physical consent communication during sexual experiences felt both easier to navigate and more accurate.

Furthermore, it is important to note that coordination is a subjective perception, and without also consulting the participants' partners, we cannot know for certain if they

were coordinated in their consent communication. The findings show when the participants did and did not *feel* coordinated in their consent communication. As is the nature of IPA studies, the findings present the nature of their subjective experiences and perspectives of events. Therefore, further research needs to explore consent communication with couples, to fully understand their differing and shared perspectives, and to learn more about the nature of coordination regarding consent communication beyond what is felt by the individual.

Furthermore, the CMC model is not an ideal of what consent 'should' be like and is instead a descriptive model which shows the logistics and patterns of sexual communication during sexual experiences. Following the subjective narratives of the participants, when felt to be coordinated all parties, the CMC cycle of interpretation and action resulted in what they felt to be good, respectful consent communication. This was dependent on the cycle including coordination, attentive listening, respect and a desire to engage in positive consensual experiences throughout the mutual interpretation and action phases.

Potentially though, the mechanisms of the CMC cycle could also describe instances of poor consent communication. Further research would need to explore this because the present study involved participants who felt they were aiming to have consensual experiences. Potentially, issues could occur during the interpretation stage if one or more people involved in the experience are not able to correctly interpret the other's communication acts or choose to ignore or disregard them. During the action phase, incorrect interpretations could then lead to unwanted actions, someone may

purposefully disregard another to perform whatever acts they want with no regard for agreement, or communication acts could include coercion or the application of pressure. Therefore CMC, as a descriptive model of the logistical processes of consent communication, could describe coordinated, healthy and respectful sexual experiences, but could also potentially describe uncoordinated, abusive, non-consensual experiences. This could be complicated further in instances when once person perceives the experience to have been coordinated, whilst the other perceives it to have been uncoordinated.

In cases of sexual assault or abuse, there is also a question of intentionality and a distinction between those wanting to cause harm and those who have experienced miscommunication (Setty, 2023). Miscommunication can occur when one party subjectively perceives the communication to be coordinated, and the other experiences it as uncoordinated. Moreover, uncoordinated CMC should not be cited as an excuse in cases of sexual assault, because even if incoordination occurred unintentionally (this was a case of miscommunication) the harm caused is no less real or impactful (Setty, 2023). If during the interpretation phase of CMC, communication signals were purposefully disregarded, and during the action phase, actions were taken regardless of the other person's willingness, these would be cases of intentional abuse. There needs to be vigilance in challenging individuals who cite that they were following CMC processes as a defence for their harmful sexual behaviour, because CMC is a descriptive model outlining the logistical processes and mechanics of consent communication, rather than an ideal. More nuances about the nature of the interpretations and actions within the CMC cycle need to be explored in any specific instance to determine intentionality and outcomes.

8.6 Explicit Communication Outside of Sexual Experiences Improved the Ease of Physical Consent Communication, Via CMC, In the Moment.

In the moment, during sexual experiences, the study participants used largely physical communication to navigate consent, following a CMC cycle of interpretation and action. However, superordinate theme two, explores how participants would communicate about sex outside of a sexual moment, which helped them to better understand their sexual partner's desires, boundaries and signalling when in the moment. Participants described effectively engaging in direct, more explicit and more verbal communication about sex outside of the bedroom, inviting an open discussion about desires and boundaries, which ensured that limits were understood and resulted in more pleasurable experiences. This communication resulted in easier consent communication in the moment following largely physical CMC cycles, as they had a better understanding of the other person's sexual desires and boundaries in advance.

The participants described having frank conversations about boundaries and desires, which sometimes took place after sex as a debrief, or could be completely detached from sexual experiences. Participants with regular sexual partners could discuss after sex about what they would like next time. As voicing sexual desires and boundaries can make someone feel vulnerable or ashamed, directly after sex felt like a good moment to discuss, as they felt more open in this moment. This communication could also take place in casual sexual relationships, or hook-ups, for example, as a brief chat in the bar or talking over text before engaging sexually. Communicating about sex directly in this way could be frightening, vulnerable and potentially shameful,

particularly with a new partner, and indeed, participants expressed high levels of sexual anxiety. They could be afraid of rejection and the possible humiliation which could come with this. However, without these conversations, the likelihood of inaccurate assumptions being used to navigate consent in the moment was increased.

The participants in longer-term relationships had experienced the most communication with their partner about sex over time, both from direct conversations and learning from prior sexual encounters, so they had developed the most detailed understanding of their partner's sexual preferences. They learnt each other's specific physical signals over time. Rather than assuming the meaning of physical signals to aid interpretation, they could readily recognise the subtle changes in their partner, which indicated wanting or refusing sex, or a particular sexual activity. They also often developed patterns or routines for consent, and set actions they, or their partner, would perform to indicate wanting a particular sexual activity, which again, made the CMC cycle easier to navigate in the moment. They knew the sex acts their partner would be likely to want, and those which were potentially unwanted. They also often developed routines of consent with ongoing sexual partners, which allowed them to determine and respond to their partner's intentions easily and quickly. For the participants, these routines made the CMC cycle feel easier to navigate in the moment.

Previous research conducted by Graf and Johnson (2021) and Willis (2019) found that individuals are more likely to accept more ambiguous consent cues in longer-term relationships. whereas explicit consent communication is considered less necessary. This study argues that individuals in longer-term relationships can more easily

navigate physical consent communication in the moment, not because they do not value consent or are accepting ambiguous cues, but because they have done the work beforehand; engaging in detailed ongoing communication which allows them to understand non-verbal signals in the moment with more ease. Thus, over time, the “rules” of interpretation and action felt clearer, and their CMC cycle felt more coordinated (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009: 3). Although complacency could occur if over time individuals devalued their partners’ consent, but from the perspectives of the participants, consent remained equally as important over time but was navigated with more ease.

8.7 CMC Summary

In summary, CMC theory describes how the study participants communicated consent with their partners. This is a descriptive model of what they were doing, the mechanics of their communication. CMC contained three key elements, which were demonstrated by findings relating to the first two superordinate themes:

1. Non-verbal communication during sexual experiences followed a CMC cycle of interpretation and action (Relates to Superordinate theme 1: PHYSICAL CONSENT COMMUNICATION DURING SEXUAL EXPERIENCES)
2. The cycle of largely physical communication in the moment was impacted by complex, intersecting layers of context such as assumptions based on gender roles and a developed understanding of their specific sexual partner and relationship (Relates to Superordinate theme 1: PHYSICAL CONSENT COMMUNICATION DURING SEXUAL EXPERIENCES & Superordinate

theme 2: TALKING AND UNDERSTANDING BEYOND SEXUAL EXPERIENCES)

3. The mostly non-verbal CMC cycle was easier to navigate during sex when the participants had previously engaged in more verbal and explicit communication about sexual desires and boundaries outside of the sexual experience (Relates to Superordinate theme 2: TALKING AND UNDERSTANDING BEYOND SEXUAL EXPERIENCES)

8.8 Addressing the Research Question: Can Engaging with Pornography Which Showcases Consent, Alongside Dedicated Space and Prompts, Allow Them to Reflect, And Influence Their Prior Conceptualisations And Practices Of Sexual Consent?

The second research sub-question relates to the malleability of the participants' consent practice and the degree to which the sample videos and study process, invited them to consider consent in new ways. The third superordinate theme answers this question and summarises how the participants engaged with the sample videos, reflected on and evaluated consent. A summary table of the sub-themes within the third Superordinate Theme can be found in the appendices.

The study process provided the space, tools and prompts to aid reflection about the nature of sexual consent and how it might be practised. As also argued by McCormack and Wignall (2017: 979), the participants did not passively or directly copy from the pornography. They used the sample pornography as a tool, to compare and contrast to their own sexual practice, and thought critically about which presentations of

consent in the videos they felt were better and poorer. The videos aided a focused discussion about what might constitute good and poor consent practice within the study process. The explicit nature of the videos made them a useful tool to directly discuss consent in the context of a sexual experience, to ground discussions and ideas rather than talking theoretically. The individual biographies of the participants (noted in the appendices) showed that broadly, the study participants stated enjoying more relatable pornography which felt to them to be more realistic. The participants' ability to differentiate between porn which felt more performative and porn which feels closer to a real experience shows a high level of porn literacy. Therefore, this group might be more able to think about pornography critically and engage in reflection and discussion about the differing presentations of consent than other groups. Alternatively, their stated preferences might just be the product of desirable responding; stating what they thought the researcher would value hearing.

They also thought about what they desired or found arousing in the videos but would evaluate if these acts were feasible and consider or discuss their partners' preferences, before introducing an idea as demonstrated in porn, because they wanted sex to involve mutual willingness and enjoyment. They actively considered if they would take any inspiration from the videos and would only consider trying a new communication technique, or a new sex act, if they critically considered its utility to their lives. If they tried a new sex position for example, and it was not beneficial to them or their partners, they would stop.

The study process helped the participants to reflect on their priorities and values regarding sexual consent. Many of their reflections led to an expression of the belief that consent is best practised when it is ongoing, to ensure continued willingness throughout an experience. They noted when verbal consent is used, a single statement before sexual contact is not sufficient, and instead, consent practice is better when it is ongoing, regardless of whether more verbal or non-verbal cues are used. They also expressed that clearer, more nuanced consent can be erotic because the verbal or non-verbal expression of wanting can be arousing.

Although the study increased the participants' depth of reflection about consent and how it can be communicated, those participants who were in a long-term sexual relationship at the time of the study, reported that they would not alter their future consent practice. If they had an established pattern of consent with a partner, they reported that they would continue to use the consent techniques learnt from experiences with that specific person, which may be mostly verbal or mostly non-verbal. These would be the most effective way for them to continue to communicate consent between them and readily understand each other because they are using signals they have learnt to interpret over time, which are unique to that person and that relationship. Therefore, these participants were more resistant to changing their consent communication practices with that partner.

8.9 Contributions of the Research

The present study's most notable contribution to the field is the novel application and development of CMM originally theorised by Pearce (2005) to the topics of sexual

behaviour and consent, to understand how the participants practised consent as an ongoing physical communication during sex. Coordinated Management of Consent (CMC) theory, developed using CMM theory and the findings of the present study, can be used to understand how individuals can communicate consent in a way which is nuanced even when it is non-verbal, throughout sexual experiences. CMC also explains how layers of context impact consent communication, how ongoing conversation and understanding about sex between partners can improve this communication and how assumptions based on norms and stereotypes can lead to uncoordinated communication.

Methodologically, the thesis offers a unique approach. Using both diaries and interviews allowed comparison between what the participants did over the study period and how they narrativised and perceived those experiences. Diaries help generate data as close to the event as possible instead of relying on memory and recall, which may produce narratives which are partially forgotten or have been subject to revision. Diaries also invite reflection and so can produce deeper thoughts about the topic. The inclusion of pornography as a tool to aid deeper reflection about consent was also unique.

Empirically, the research adds to an existing body of work about young people, men and consent, with a focus on the consent communication of a specific group: men, 18-25, who have sex with women, at a UK university (Setty, 2021; Graf and Johnson, 2021; Muehlenhard et al, 2016; Willis et al, 2020). The research is also timely, given contemporary concern about young men, their attitudes towards young women, sexual

abuse and harassment, so it addresses a current need to better understand consent amongst young men.

The research engages with current debates on consent best practices and what would qualify as high or poor-quality consent practice. In the current UK context, in law, education and campaigns, best practice is understood as following the “affirmative consent model” (Graf and Johnson, 2021; Setty, 2021). Previously, best practice, as taught in education and campaigns, followed ‘no means no’ approaches, which emphasised that any signal of refusal at any time, needs to be immediately respected (Graf and Johnson, 2021: 449; Muehlenhard et al, 2016: 465). The affirmative model places responsibility on the initiator to obtain consent, whilst the ‘no means no’ approach places responsibility on the other person to refuse. The issue with both of these approaches is that they are highly transactional and simplistic, do not engage with context, and portray consent as an object to be obtained from one person by another. Moreover, multiple previous studies have found that these policies, although they might be taught in sex education, are not how most people tend to practice consent. Consent has been found to be practised mostly non-verbally and tentatively, and my research has corroborated this finding (Willis et al, 2020).

Previous studies have explored why most people tend to prefer non-verbal consent. Verbal consent can feel unnatural or can feel awkward or embarrassing (Willis et al, 2020; Edwards, Rehman and Byers, 2022: 2417; Shumlich & Fisher, 2020: 1115). There is a greater risk of shame at being rejected after asking directly, so people initiate more tentatively and non-verbally to avoid the shame of explicit rejection

(Shumlich & Fisher, 2020: 1115). To ask directly and unexpectedly could also be deemed “inexperienced”, “creepy” or “pushy” (Shumlich & Fisher, 2020: 1115). My study adds to the body of literature which argues that individuals use mostly non-verbal, physical communication, to navigate consent. However, whilst these studies explore *why* people use non-verbal consent, my research explores and explains *how* people communicate non-verbally about consent during sex. The CMC model provides a way of understanding the logistics of how non-verbal, physical consent communication can function and be practised.

Previous academics have argued that consent best practice should be an ongoing process because sexual experiences change and develop (Muehlenhard et al, 2016; Hills et al, 2021). However, Willis et al (2020) found that although consent should ideally be an ongoing process, this is not common and it is considered a social norm that consent can just occur at the start of a sexual experience and does not need to occur throughout. In contrast, my study participants did engage in ongoing consent communication (albeit largely non-verbal) which allowed them to navigate consent as they and their partners introduced new sexual acts to an experience.

There is a body of research, as explored in the literature chapters, which illustrates the impact of cultural norms regarding consent practice in the Western context. I shall now unpack how these contextual factors can impact consent communication and interact with CMC, as presented by the study participants. Firstly, sometimes desire or arousal is considered synonymous with consent (Muehlenhard et al, 2016). The participants navigated a complex array of physical signals to determine their partners’ ongoing

consent and show their own. These included signs of desire, but arousal alone was not considered sufficient to determine consent. Secondly, gender roles (the idea that men are active/always willing and ask, whilst women are passive/ sometimes willing and respond) have been found to have a large impact on consent norms in heterosexual dynamics (Willis et al, 2020). Indeed, the CMC cycle as navigated by the study participants was complicated by assumptions based on gender roles and heteronormativity. As young men, participants sometimes felt pressure to be the one to ask for or determine their partner's consent, and sometimes felt that their consent was assumed. They thought that sexual experiences were better when consent was mutually communicated, both checking in on each other throughout the experience, regardless of gender. Thirdly, there are arguments in the literature that people assume, or think they can assume, consent in longer-term sexual relationships (Graf and Johnson, 2021). The participants described finding consent easier to navigate in longer-term relationships. However, they did not think that consent was less important or could be assumed due to their relationship status. Instead, they had developed routines, detailed understandings of the other person's likes and dislikes and the specific signals they give out, which made physical consent communication via CMC easier. Finally, research in the field has argued that individuals feel that more explicit consent is needed for higher-order sex acts (Willis & Smith, 2022). This was reflected in the study participants' experiences. They described sex as a series of acts culminating in intimacy, and they would determine to consent by tentatively introducing lower-order acts before higher-order ones. They might use verbal or more explicit consent to double-check consent for higher-order acts.

In addition, previous research has also considered the use of pornography as an educational tool. There are heated debates regarding whether the lessons learnt from porn are more useful or harmful (Mikkola, 2019). However, when sex education is absent, inconsistent or too theoretical, people may purposefully turn to pornography for sexual information (Duncan and Donnelly, 1991; Oosterhoff et al, 2016; Litsou et al, 2021). Porn can be a safe space to explore desires without the social risk of involving another person, explore sexual identity, can show the logistics/ mechanics of sex, and lead to the normalisation of a greater range of sexual experiences (Dawson et al, 2022; Weinberg et al, 2010). Furthermore, educational porn is purposefully created to educate (Albury, 2014; Leonard, 2012). The present study expands these ideas about using porn to aid discussions about physically safe sex and considered the usefulness of pornography to aid reflective conversations about emotionally safe sex, sexual communication and consent. Consistent with arguments from McCormack and Wignall (2017), who argue that people do not copy directly or passively from pornography, the study participants used the sample materials as a tool throughout the research process without copying consent communication strategies from them directly. Using the porn as an explicit source helped to ground their reflections about consent. They used the videos as a tool to aid their reflections on consent and ground thoughts in a sexual context, to bounce ideas off, to highlight examples of good and poor practice, to compare and contrast their practice and to think about their values regarding consent.

8.10 Limitations of the Research

The participants were 18–25-year-old men who have sex with women currently enrolled in higher education. The data were analysed interpretatively therefore the

researcher's perspective influenced this process and a different researcher may form different themes from the data. Therefore, although IPA methodology allowed a detailed exploration of these participants and their specific context, the outcomes of this research are only applicable to the small homogenous group involved in the study; it is not generalisable. However, the findings can be used to develop new theoretical ideas about consent, which could be used to explore other populations. The study also has a self-selection bias.

Furthermore, IPA, as a self-reporting methodology produces situated, inherently subjective accounts, not unquestionable truths. Therefore, the findings show what the participants felt to be true from their perspective during their sexual experiences. This is also potentially muddled further by pressures associated with the performance of masculinity and a want to report desirably when these experiences are narrativised for the researcher in the interviews and written diaries (which may be amplified in a male participant/ female researcher dynamic). Pressures associated with the individuals' unique performances of masculinity can impact how they view their consent experiences and how they choose to describe these for the researcher. The literature chapter has demonstrated how different masculine pressures can lead to men feeling more pressure to disregard consent or overestimate/ assume women's sexual interest, or to lead to men feeling more pressure to be perceived as careful about consent and feeling responsible for consent in heterosexual dynamics (Rollero & Roccato, 2023; Shafer et al, 2018; Rerick, Livingston & Davis, 2020; Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013). Both of these factors result in a need to consider the findings of this study critically, as the narratives shared by the participants may have been impacted by these strong but also conflicting pressures on young men. However, this thesis aimed to explore how

the participants uniquely understood consent and their subjective experiences of consent communication. Therefore, even if their non-objective narratives are useful to answer the research questions because they provide insight into their subjective viewpoints and highlight the contextual pressures specific to each individual which can influence consent behaviour such as the pressures associated with different masculinity ideals.

There is also a question of agency to be considered, to what degree the participants' behaviours are guided by social expectations and to what degree they are freely chosen (Shapiro, 2005; Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; Hornsby, 2004). The analysis of the participants' accounts demonstrated a combination in their subjective perspectives as they described their behaviours as motivated by wider social expectations, previous experiences, personal values and specific to their relationship with a sexual partner, suggesting some individual agency within the bounds set by wider factors.

The findings are specific to the group of participants involved in the research. All participants volunteered to take part, gave informed consent so they knew the nature of the study and identified themselves as within the required demographic. Thus, only those who felt they would be comfortable discussing their sexual experiences with a researcher volunteered. The participants therefore may be better than average sexual communicators so may have displayed higher skill regarding sexual communication and consent practice than the general population. The research excludes those who would not feel comfortable discussing sexuality with a researcher and so does not

address the experiences of these people. Future research needs to explore ways to include these people and allow their voices to be heard.

In addition, higher education provides a specific context and a unique set of life experiences, which influence the participants' values and outlooks. The group is also likely to be a part of a higher social class, excluding those from different class backgrounds who are likely to have different life experiences regarding consent. As many of the participants reflected on their interpretations of their female partners' actions and mannerisms, it would be useful in future to consider the female perspective or to invite couples to take part to understand differing perspectives on the same events. The study also only considers the UK context. The participants were based at a UK university and the topic was explored considering UK policy and law. As all participants were adults, the research can make suggestions for consent education aimed at young adults and is less applicable to school-based sex and relationships education.

There were also some limitations which became apparent during the data collection process. As it was a longitudinal study, requiring at least six weeks of my participants' time there were four of the eleven participants who either withdrew or became unresponsive to communication after the first interview. Another issue was that those who completed the diary entries did not engage in as much sexual activity as anticipated and so did not produce as many diary entries as expected. Therefore, the data does not contain the full six-week process for all the participants so these are

experiences which could not be captured, analysed and contributed to the findings. However, for an IPA study the final data set was still sufficient.

8.11 Recommendations for Further Research and Potential Applications

The findings of this study, and CMC theory as a way of understanding those findings, are specific to the participants involved. The most pressing further research to follow the present study, would be research involving couples or sexual partners. CMM from which CMC is developed, usually requires engagement with everyone involved in the communication. Thus, whilst this study has presented the subjective experiences and feelings of young men and how they perceive communication to function, we cannot be sure of how communication flows between themselves and their partner, without the involvement of the partners. A future study should discuss consent communication with everyone involved in the sexual experience to explore how CMC functions between them, how they feel about their consent communication, levels of coordination and the differing contextual pressures impacting their communication in practice.

Before considering the usefulness of the findings in practice, further research needs to be conducted to determine how the CMC model functions amongst other groups beyond the participants in this study. Firstly, this research included a group of self-selecting young men who are therefore more likely to be comfortable discussing consent and therefore more likely to value and feel more confident with consent communication. There is also a need to be critical about how participants wanted to present themselves in interview, potentially wanting to show themselves as adhering

to an idealised form of caring masculinities, a 'good man' who is respectful, caring and attuned to the needs of others (Elliott, 2016). This may be their true nature or a performance of masculinity whilst being perceived. The results presented in this thesis are only relevant to the subjective experiences and narratives of the study participants; men who are aiming to have and want to be perceived as having consensual and respectful sexual experiences. Therefore, further research using a range of methods, need to explore consent communication in real-world settings to uncover if the experiences of these participants align with others'.

Future research also needs to consider if CMC is also a useful way to explore how women and non-binary individuals to navigate consent during sexual experiences. Research also needs to consider those in LGBTQ+ relationships, different relationship styles such as non-monogamy and group dynamics, and those who engage in kink or fetish practices. It would also be interesting to consider consent communication within relationships by consulting with sexual partners rather than individuals. This would involve understanding how they practice sexual consent and interpreting or assessing their partner's consent practice. The participants' consent practice was largely physical and involved a large degree of interpretation, relying on their comfort and accuracy in interpreting social signals and cues. Therefore, further research needs to consider if this practice is also enacted by neurodivergent individuals or people who are less comfortable with physical communication and understanding non-verbal social cues. Moreover, research conducted by McKenney et al (2024) suggests that neurodiverse undergraduate students prefer to use explicit verbal consent during sex but feel unusual for doing so. So further research needs to explore if CMC is a useful way to understand consent amongst this population.

If also present in the consent communication styles of other demographics, CMC could be used to help describe the complex mechanics of how consent is commonly communicated, which could be used to develop more nuanced consent education programmes or campaigns. When engaging with young people in higher education, a programme featuring workshops and discussion sessions could be hosted formally through the university. However, an online campaign such as “Teach Us Consent” may have more reach (Contos, 2022).

Sex education programmes usually argue that the best consent practice is verbal, following the affirmative model, and encouraging verbal consent in the moment, even though most people do not do this (Graf and Johnson, 2021; Setty, 2021). Although most of the study participants defined consent according to the affirmative model, their consent communication which their partners followed the CMC model of ongoing physical communication. This suggests that being taught the affirmative consent model as an ideal altered their definition but did not alter their behaviour. In addition to the affirmative model, I would recommend that consent education programmes use the CMC model, a descriptive model of how consent is communicated and rooted in real-world evidence, as a contribution towards developing nuanced discussions about what respectful, clear consent communication looks like, and how consent communication might be improved. This thesis demonstrates that the participants felt that their consent communication was most effective when it was nuanced and ongoing. Therefore, programmes could focus on how to encourage, open, ongoing, detailed communication between sexual partners. Future research needs to explore

the usefulness of incorporating CMC, as a model contributing to understandings about how people commonly communicate consent, into sex education. Further research needs to explore what a safe and ethical approach to the integration of the CMC model into educational programmes would look like.

Amongst the study participants, physical communication in the moment was hindered by assumptions about their partner based on wider stereotypes. Thus, I would also advise such future programmes to include critical thinking about the role of gendered stereotypes with regard to consent and sexual behaviour, particularly to help challenge assumptions about the roles and preferences of men and women in heterosexual dynamics.

Amongst the participants, physical communication in the moment felt easier to navigate when they could engage in wider communications with their sexual partners about their desires, boundaries, and foster increased understanding of their partner's specific communicative signals during sex. I would therefore suggest that a programme encourage individuals to reflect on their own wants and limits and how they tend to act during sex when they are comfortable or uncomfortable and suggest methods to aid more comfortable, open communications about sex amongst sexual partners. If an educational campaign was developed as outlined above, further research would need to be conducted to evaluate its efficacy and to understand how useful CMC is for guiding consent education.

With regards to the usefulness of educational pornography for the purposes of adult consent education, the study found explicit media to be a useful tool to aid reflection and conversations about consent. The sample materials provided an explicit demonstration of what consent could look like, which the participants used to compare and contrast to their own practice to better understand their values regarding consent, as part of a reflective process. When sexual consent education often considers the topic theoretically, using explicit sources was useful to directly talk about the topic. Educational pornography about consent would therefore need to be integrated into an educational programme rather than existing as a standalone source because the participants did not passively absorb consent messages or copy behaviours in the videos. Potentially, consent education programmes could use vignettes or images rather than pornographic videos to aid discussion to achieve the same outcome; a deeper evaluation of consent, grounded in an explicit sexual context.

Moreover, during interviews, the participants volunteered information about high levels of anxiety about sex and relationships even though this was not a focus of the present study and they were not asked about this directly. They were nervous about consent, their anxiety was often rooted in gendered pressures and sexual myths, and for some, caused sexual dysfunction. They volunteered this information to me explaining that they were asking me for advice and support as they did not have anywhere to go with their concerns. Although I could not offer them any advice, I listened to their concerns. This suggests a need to conduct further research into the nature and causes of sexual anxiety in young men, as well as the development of accessible support regarding sex, relationships and consent, for young men.

8.12 Discussion Summary

This discussion chapter has outlined the three superordinate themes created from the participants' data, their interviews and diary entries, which answer the research questions. Superordinate themes one and two reflected previous studies about the practice of consent, which argue that although most people understand consent ideally as an explicit agreement, they more frequently utilise non-verbal, physical communication strategies in the moment. Their physical communication in the moment was aided by ongoing, more direct verbal communication about sex outside of the moment. Superordinate theme three refers to the novel introduction of pornography which demonstrates consent as a tool to aid reflection on the nature of consent. The participants in the study did reflect on consent more deeply, using the sample materials as an explicit portrayal of what consent could look like within the context of sexual experience. However, those participants with ongoing sexual partners reported that they would not change their practice, it was less malleable and would continue to use familiar consent communication techniques.

Finally, and most notably, this thesis uniquely presents and explores a new model of consent communication: Coordinated Management of Consent (CMC), which is rooted in the participants' real-world experiences of consent communication. The theory takes aspects of Pearce's (2005) communication theory, Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM), and originally applies it to sexual communication and consent as present in the participants' data. The participants described practising ongoing, nuanced and specific consent throughout an evolving and changing sexual experience via a cycle of interpretation and action, which allowed them to continuously (re)negotiate consent. The participants' physical consent communication was also

influenced by layers of context. The most detrimental factor to effective physical communication was gender roles and stereotypes. The factor which most aided effective physical communication was learning more about an ongoing sexual partner over time. This was aided by ongoing conversations about sexual boundaries and desires. The theory describes and explains how the participants navigated consent during their sexual experiences; the mechanics of their communication. CMC was developed from these specific participants' experiences and narratives, so, as the participants are subject to wider cultural expectations and norms, CMC may also describe the consent communication of other populations, but further research with other groups will be needed to explore this. Further research needs to be conducted to understand how other demographics communicate consent and how to safely integrate CMC into consent education programmes.

9 CONCLUSION

9.1 A Summary of The Research Scope, Aims and Methods

This thesis sought to better understand how young men who have sex with women understand and practise sexual consent and how this can be influenced. Previous research in the field has shown that ideal consent is often conceptualised theoretically and simplistically. When ideal consent is highly theoretical there is a need to understand how individuals communicate consent in real-world situations when they are aiming to have positive consensual experiences. Real-world consent practises can be varied, nuanced and communication changes according to context. Consent is also malleable and can be influenced by external factors. This research sought to explore real-world consent experiences and to uncover not just what conceptualisation and practice of consent can consist of, but the technicalities and mechanics of *how* it is communicated, and what it can feel like to experience this communication. The study involved listening to young adult men about their experiences of sex and consent. In a contemporary climate where discussions about consent and gender can be fuelled by fear and blame, the research considered the subjective lived experiences of young men from a non-judgemental perspective.

The research was guided by two research sub-questions:

1. How do young men who have sex with women conceptualise and practise sexual consent?
2. Can engaging with pornography which showcases consent, alongside dedicated space and prompts, allow them to reflect, and influence their prior conceptualisations and practises of sexual consent.

The research used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore the participants' lived experiences of consent; how they practised consent and their thoughts, feelings and values about consent. The personal and subjective nature of the participants' experiences was at the heart of this process. Qualitative data were collected interpretatively via two semi-structured interviews and six weeks of diary entries. The participants were given a sample set of pornographic videos which contained consent communication, to watch and think about over the study period; an explicit resource to aid deeper reflection. Semi-structured interviews were useful because they allowed the participants to discuss what was most important to them and most central to their experiences. In addition, the diary study complimented the interviews because it gave the opportunity to consider the participants' practises to see how their consent strategies did or did not change over the study period. It also allowed for comparison between what the participants did and how they turned that behaviour into a narrative in the interviews. The process invited participants to share and reflect on their subjective experiences of sexual consent. The participants self-selected to take part, and all identified themselves as within the demographic: men, 18-25 years old, who have sex with women.

Three superordinate themes were created to summarise the findings from the participants' data:

1. Superordinate theme 1: PHYSICAL CONSENT COMMUNICATION DURING SEXUAL EXPERIENCES
2. Superordinate theme 2: TALKING AND UNDERSTANDING BEYOND SEXUAL EXPERIENCES
3. Superordinate theme 3: REFLECTING ON AND EVALUATING NEW INFORMATION AND IDEAS ABOUT CONSENT

9.2 How Do Young Men Who Have Sex with Women Conceptualise and Practise Sexual Consent?

Regarding the first sub-question, the existing literature on consent practice showcases a discordance between how consent is conceptualised as an ideal and how it is widely practised. Most people will define consent as an explicit, mostly verbal, agreement, but this definition is theoretical (Setty, 2021). In contrast, studies have found that consent is largely practised non-verbally, is a complex and nuanced type of communication, and is influenced by assumptions and social norms (Graf and Johnson, 2021; Muehlenhard et al, 2016; Simon & Gagnon, 2002). Consent practice is influenced by assumptions about gender and gender stereotypical sexual behaviours (Willis et al, 2019: 60; Setty, 2022:530; Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013). Expected consent practice is also impacted by the relationship type and length of sexual relationships (Graf and Johnson, 2021: 450; Willis, Murray & Jozkowski, 2021: 671-2). Finally, consent may be communicated differently according to the type of sex act with different norms depending on whether an act is considered higher order and

more intimate, or lower order (Willis & Smith, 2022). The present study adds to the field, with a focus on young men specifically, and their perceptions and experiences of consent.

As shown by other research in the field, there was a discrepancy between how the participants defined ideal consent and how they communicated consent with their sexual partners (Graf and Johnson, 2021; Goodcase, Spencer & Toews, 2021; Shumlich & Fisher, 2020). They defined consent as a mostly verbal transaction prior to sex, following the affirmative model. However, their consent communication was mostly non-verbal in the moment, using physical communication throughout evolving sexual experiences. Their communication was nuanced, ongoing and highly context-dependent.

The first two superordinate themes provide answers to the first research sub-question about how the participants practised and understood sexual consent. The participant's understanding and practice of consent can be explored and explained via Coordinated Management of Consent (CMC), which I have developed from the participants' data and the novel application of Pearce's (2005) Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) communication theory to sexual communication and consent. CMC describes *how* they communicated consent. CMC is presented as a descriptive model of the mechanics of the participants' consent communication and should not be advocated for as an 'ideal'. However, as a descriptor of how consent can be practised, it could be used as a contributing idea when discussing how consent communication might be improved within sex and consent education contexts.

Participants followed a CMC cycle of interpretation and action to navigate consent during sexual experiences using mostly physical communication. This was explored in superordinate theme 1. They used this cycle to suggest further acts, understand when their partner was suggesting further acts, give and refuse consent, and notice when their partner was giving and refusing consent. They often understood sex as a series of stages and their communication was the most conscious and purposeful in the liminal spaces between the stages which make up an evolving sexual experience. The primary takeaway I would like to put forward about the participants' practice of consent is that although they did not often communicate verbally during sex, they were communicating. Their physical communication was nuanced, specific and carefully navigated throughout sexual experiences.

The CMC cycle was impacted by complex and entwining layers of context. Some contextual factors such as gender norms could lead to inaccurate assumptions and make physical consent communication less coordinated and more difficult to navigate. Other contextual factors, such as understanding a partner's specific desires and body language, made physical consent communication feel more coordinated and easier to navigate.

The participants engaged in more explicit and verbal communication about sex outside of the moment, which increased their coordination and allowed them to more easily navigate the CMC cycle in the moment and communicate effectively using more physical signalling. This was explored in superordinate theme 2. These conversations

meant that they understood what might and what might not be wanted before a sexual experience begins (what was on and off the table), so they had a better understanding of what acts to introduce, how tentatively to introduce them, and what signs of enjoyment or discomfort to look for during the experience. The participants in longer-term relationships had engaged in the most conversations about sex with their partner over time, learnt from previous experiences together and sometimes developed routines for consent. Therefore, they found the CMC cycle easier to navigate non-verbally in the moment.

9.3 Can Engaging with Pornography that showcases Consent, Alongside Dedicated Space and Prompts, Allow Them to Reflect, And Influence Their Prior Conceptualisations and Practises of Sexual Consent?

The second research sub-question also builds on previous studies, which have explored pornography as an educational resource. Pornography can provide an explicit demonstration of the logistics of sex, provide a low-stakes environment to explore identities and new desires in private, expand their sexual repertoire and facilitate solo pleasure (Dawson et al, 2022:1257; Weinberg et al, 2010: 1391; Litsou et al, 2021: 247; Albury, 2014:175). Elements of pornography have been successfully used to provide excitement and context to safe sex materials relating to physically safe sex; and condom use (Leonard, 2012: 836). This thesis explores the original concept that porn could be used to prompt discussion and a deeper reflection of sexual consent to aid the methodology, by showing examples of what consent can look like explicitly in context. However, it is vital to note that whilst pornography may provide suggestions or prompts, consumers do not thoughtlessly or directly copy what they view in video pornography. Consumers have agency and will actively engage with the material, and

decide what ideas, if any, they would like to take from it (McCormack and Wignall, 2017: 979).

The third superordinate theme: reflecting via the sample materials and study process, speaks to the second research sub-question. The participants used the sample videos as an explicit example to compare and contrast to their own consent practice and reflect on their communication strategies. The sample videos were a useful resource to help prompt discussion about consent because they were explicit and could be directly referenced and unpacked, rather than just talking about consent in theory. The participants did not directly copy from the videos, using them as a resource, rather than a direct guide, and evaluated the different examples and their own experience in detail.

The participants made some suggestions about what good consent practice may look like. They suggested that consent should be ongoing throughout sexual experiences as they develop, that a single statement of consent prior to sex is not sufficient, and that partners need to constantly (re)evaluate consent throughout experiences, regardless of whether that ongoing communication is more verbal or non-verbal. They also noted that clear consent can be arousing as well as moral because being clearly wanted felt erotic.

However, their deeper reflections about consent prompted by the study process did not necessarily result in a change in practice. The participants in longer-term relationships noted that although they understood that consent might be

communicated in different ways, they would continue to use the methods they consistently used with their specific partner. This was because they easily understood these communications and had established a routine, which made consent communication feel easier in the moment. Yet, those participants who were not in long-term relationships were open to potentially thinking about different ways to effectively communicate consent with their future sexual partners.

9.4 Implications for Consent Education

Further research will need to be conducted to explore if other demographics also utilise CMC. If so, an understanding of CMC as a way consent can be communicated between sexual partners, could be used as a foundational idea from which to build consent education conversations. Rather than using the affirmative model as an idealised depiction of how consent *should* be practised as the basis for consent education, an underlying descriptive model of how consent is commonly communicated by young men (CMC), could be used. CMC could be a contributing resource to aid useful conversations with young men about what clear, respectful consent communication looks like and how their consent communication could be improved. Programmes could encourage ongoing, nuanced and respect-driven communication throughout sexual experiences.

Pornography was a useful tool to aid reflections about consent in the present study because it is an explicit example to be discussed. So, programmes could potentially use porn, vignettes, stories or images, as appropriate, to help ground discussions about consent within a context and help to explore the complexity of different situations

regarding consent communication. Programmes could also encourage the evaluation of consent communication strategies and an interrogation of the assumptions and norms which can disrupt communication, such as assumptions about gender roles during (hetero)sexual experiences.

Overall, this thesis provides a beneficial deeper understanding of how young men who have sex with women understand consent, their real-world experiences and a new model (CMC) to describe how consent is communicated.

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APPENDICES

1. SUPERORDINATE THEMES AND SUB-THEMES

Each superordinate theme was divided into subthemes which present the different nuances within the superordinate theme. The superordinate themes and subthemes within, are summarised in the tables below:

Superordinate theme 1: PHYSICAL CONSENT COMMUNICATION DURING SEXUAL EXPERIENCES

Superordinate theme 2: TALKING AND UNDERSTANDING BEYOND SEXUAL EXPERIENCES

Superordinate theme 3: REFLECTING ON AND EVALUATING NEW INFORMATION AND IDEAS ABOUT CONSENT

PHYSICAL CONSENT COMMUNICATION DURING SEXUAL EXPERIENCES

ASKING DIRECTLY	The participants conceptualised ideal, verbal consent as a direct question and answer which contrasted their largely non-verbal, yet nuanced, practice.
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USING PHYSICAL CONSENT COMMUNICATION	The participants navigated consent as a physical form of communication feeling willingness or discomfort as a tone or atmosphere.
INITIATING AND RECIPROCATING	The participants followed a mutual, reciprocal dance of initiation and acceptance to navigate consent as a sexual experience changes and progresses.
ASKING FOR REASSURANCE	If the participants were to ask for consent verbally, this would only happen after they were mostly certain of their partner's consent via non-verbal signals, for confirmation.
MAKING GENDERED ASSUMPTIONS	Consent practice and non-verbal signalling were complicated by gendered stereotypes and assumptions about consent and sexual desire.

TALKING AND UNDERSTANDING BEYOND SEXUAL EXPERIENCES

COMMUNICATING ABOUT DESIRE DURING SEX	The participants noted a connection between quality sexual communication and increased pleasure.
DISCUSSING SEX IN ADVANCE	The participants described having explicit and ongoing conversations about sex outside of the moment (what was and was not wanted) with their sexual partners.

CREATING ROUTINES FOR CONSENT	The participants explained that over time they developed routines for consent with their ongoing sexual partners specific to that partner and relationship.
QUICKLY READING SIGNALS	As the participants learnt their partner's specific and potentially subtle signals over time, noting when sex was wanted and the type of sex wanted became quick and easy.

REFLECTING ON AND EVALUATING NEW INFORMATION AND IDEAS ABOUT CONSENT

BEING INSPIRED TO TRY NEW THINGS	The participants expressed an interest in trying some of the sex positions and acts shown in the videos. Although they were inspired, they would not copy passively and would critically consider incorporating the acts shown.
THINKING ABOUT DIFFERENT CONSENT PRACTICES	The participants were encouraged to think about how consent could be differently practised, particularly how verbal consent could be more nuanced and ongoing.
REFLECTING ON, NOT	The sample videos were utilised by the participants as a tool to aid reflection, rather than a model to copy from directly and passively.

COPYING, CONSENT	
RESISTING NEW APPROACH ES	The participants in established relationships expressed that they would not alter their consent practice because the understanding and routines they have developed with their partners are easy to navigate and mutually understood.
THINKING ABOUT FUTURE PRACTICE	The participants who did not have regular sexual partners at the time of the study expressed that they may practise consent differently with a future partner and think about the reflections produced via the study in doing so.

2. PARTICIPANT BIOGRAPHIES

NAME	Research Stages Completed			Age	Ethnicity	Sexualit y	Gender Identity
<i>Tim</i>	Interview 1	Diary Study	Interview 2	20	White British	Heterose xual	Man
<i>Zixin</i>	Interview 1	Diary Study	Interview 2	23	Chinese	Heterose xual	Man
<i>Frank</i>	Interview 1	Diary Study	Interview 2	25	White and Black Caribbea n	Bisexual	Man

<i>Ellis</i>	Interview 1	Diary Study	Interview 2	20	White British	Sapphic	Gender fluid
<i>John</i>	Interview 1	Diary Study	Interview 2	22	White British	Heterose xual	Man
<i>Chris</i>	Interview 1	No sex so no diaries	Interview 2	25	White British	Heterose xual/ Questioni ng Pansexu al	Man

<i>Henry</i>	Interview 1	No sex so no diaries	Interview 2	19	White	Bisexual	Man
<i>Owen</i>	Interview 1	Did not finish (DNF)	Did not finish (DNF)	20	White British	Heterose xual	Man
<i>Chima</i>	Interview 1	DNF	DNF	19	Black British	Heterose xual	Man
<i>Eric</i>	Interview 1	DNF	DNF	20	White British	Heterose xual/ Questioni ng Biromanti c	Man

<i>Dylan</i>	Interview 1	DNF	DNF	20	White and Indian	Bisexual	Man
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Frank – Interview 1, 15 diaries (sex with girlfriend), Interview 2

Frank is 25 years old, mixed race (white and black Caribbean) and bisexual. He consumes pornography weekly, and notes that in the past it has been more frequent. He says that he watches porn less often because he is now living with his long-term partner. He and his female partner have been together for a few years and have sex regularly, 3-4 times per week.

Frank mostly finds porn online on Pornhub, he does not look for specific types of porn, and will just "pick something off of the homepage". He enjoys porn but thinks that it is a "very base release", a "quick satisfaction", he enjoys it for the pleasure in the moment but there is little depth to his enjoyment. He also reflects that with age he has learnt the "differences" "between sex and porn" and understands porn as a fantasy showing sex which "no real girl actually enjoys". He also expresses worry about younger men learning about sex from mainstream porn and getting unrealistic expectations, such as the prevalence of "anal" and "rough sex".

Frank would Google sex questions but thinks this sounds "dire". However, he does not know where else he could go for support, unless it was a medical issue, in which case he would see a doctor. He says that in the past he might have worried more about consent and if he was refused it might have led to "into a bit of a spiral about it and thought, oh God, what am I doing wrong?".

Frank's partner actively engaged with the study. They watched the sample videos together and engaged in discussion about them, and reflected together about how consent was presented. They do not watch porn together as part of their usual sex life, so were just doing this for the study. He also watched them alone frequently, watching them both as erotic material and having them on in the background to increase his familiarity, making an effort to think about them more for the study. Not all of the sample porn were things he considers attractive, and he also consumed other porn over the study period.

He learnt about consent when he was young at home, as his mother, a social worker, made an effort to teach him and provide him with resources. He felt like his formal sex education in school was poor, but he remembers it well. The classes were segregated by gender and many of the boys misbehaved. When he first came to university there was a welcome week lecture which included consent education. He felt like this was a good idea but was poorly done. The lecture was fear based and overwhelming, giving lots of "horrificing" statistics about sexual assault on campus. He also does not think that a lecture like this is enough to prevent abuse on campus as the "sort of person" who would assault on purpose would do this regardless of the lecture.

At the end of the study, he defined consent as "explicitly and without sort of any coercion allowing someone to do something to you", thinking about it from the perspective of the person giving consent. He also reflects on the nuances of sexual consent, which can make it difficult, such as different "interpretation", and the influence of alcohol. He also notes that there are more factors than a simple yes or no because pressure or coercion can be subtle, and sexual assault is not often the stereotypical predatory stranger.

Tim - Interview 1, 8 diaries (sex with girlfriend), Interview 2

Tim is 20 years old, white and heterosexual. Tim and his current girlfriend have been together for 18 months. They are at university together so will have sex frequently (4/5 times per week) in term time and every couple of weeks when they see each other in the holidays. He has had two previous sexual partners, both one-night stands, so most of his experiences are with his girlfriend. If Tim had questions about sex, he would turn to Reddit or just Google his question.

Prior to the study, he said he would watch porn "once or twice a week". His university accommodation Wi-Fi blocks most porn sites, so he finds pornography on Twitter and Reddit. Although he consumes porn frequently, he dislikes a lot of the features of mainstream porn. He does not like looking at porn stars who look unrealistic, with lots of "work done" and "ridiculously big boobs". He also does not enjoy it when they are taking part in extreme acts or "over exaggerating noise wise", for example, he disliked the sample videos containing anal sex as these felt most unrealistic to him. As he enjoys porn which feels realistic and relatable to him,

he enjoys looking at his girlfriend's nudes, homemade porn. He also feels some shame about consuming porn and says that although he will enjoy it in the moment, afterwards he may feel ashamed because "obviously there's the stigma", he says that during the period of "post nut clarity" he sometimes feels regret in his consumption.

Tim did take part in sex education in his final year of primary school but does not remember it well. He remembers that the boys and girls were separated, and he was shown a video. He was "pretty sure there would've been something in that about making sure that both parties want to take part"; he thinks consent should have been covered but he did not remember it. For him, learning about consent was a process of "figuring out" from other sources, and "knowing like obviously right from wrong". Most of his knowledge about consent comes from media such as television, movies and the news. He also mentions that he learnt about consent from "seeing different scenarios when watching porn" prior to this study, and that porn helped him to understand what consensual sex could look like. Seeing discussions about consent in the news helped him to understand that "when there's no consent, that's a big bad thing, it's a crime, it's like something that's really bad in society". He is worried about "false allegations", which drive him to practice consent clearly, but also drive fear and anxiety.

During the study, he enjoyed some of the sample videos more than others and did consume the videos he liked as erotic material. He enjoyed the Bellesa films video as it felt the most realistic and disliked the anal sex videos. He also enjoyed homemade pornography created with his partner over the study period. His girlfriend knew about the study, but they did not discuss it. When asked if he would look at porn with consent in future, Tim said that if the porn was otherwise arousing to him, he would watch it. If

the title of a video said "consent" explicitly he would not be more or less likely to watch it. The type of sex shown was more important to him that the educational content in guiding him in selecting porn videos, so for him, educative porn needs to be sexy first and educational second.

At the end of the study Tim summarised consent as "an agreement like to do something" which "can be removed at any time".

John - Interview 1, 1 diary (sex with girlfriend), Interview 2

John is 22 years old, white British and heterosexual. He is also in a long-term, long-distance relationship and sees his girlfriend about once per week. They usually have sex when they see each other. He chose not to tell his partner about the study. He explains that "she's less sexually open" and "has never consumed porn, doesn't masturbate, that sort of thing" so he worried that she would find his participation "strange". John expressed worry about sexual dysfunction explaining that he often struggles to maintain an erection prior to penetrative sex due to "performance anxiety". When describing the nature of the issue, he trailed off, embarrassed, but noted that he finds the issue very "frustrating".

He watches porn a couple of times per week, but this does vary. He enjoys watching porn because it is arousing, which he feels is "clearly" an obvious reason for consuming porn. He also enjoys how "aesthetic" porn can be, and that seeing "good looking people naked" is visually pleasing. John mostly finds pornography on Reddit, short videos or gifs, and will search through specific

subreddits to find different types of porn. He likes to find more amateur porn, "homemade stuff", because it feels more realistic and is more likely to showcase female pleasure and orgasms. He has also previously searched for porn with condom use.

During the study period, he watched the sample videos regularly. He watched them all at the start, considered which he liked best, and then consumed those regularly, enjoying them for their erotic content. His favourite video was by Bellesa films, and he disliked the videos featuring anal sex. He liked the "intimacy" shown, it felt more real and more like his sex life. Some videos were more "hardcore" and less relatable. He continued to consume porn on Reddit through the study period. He noted that he would watch porn with consent, but he would not search for it, it would just be a bonus if the video was otherwise interesting to him. However, he says that he does like to look for porn which shows real female pleasure and thinks that a video which values consent might also value this too and so be more interesting.

If John has questions about sex, he will usually Google his question or might look on Reddit to hear from other people's experiences. He thinks that consent "must have come up" in sex education in school, he thinks it should have been taught, but he cannot remember these classes. He also expressed a lot of anxiety about cases of rape in the news, which have led him to feel safer asking for consent verbally because he is worried about misinterpreting signs or false allegations. He described feeling frightened of accidentally getting consent wrong, giving examples of when a man may be accused of assault but, from his perspective, was not purposefully committing assault. He was concerned about getting in trouble rather than about harming another. He feels like men are unfairly and disproportionately accused of sexual assault by women, giving examples:

"What if you find yourself in that situation where you think they want it, but they don't want it, and then you end up with criminal charges"

"You are drunk, but they might also be drunk and then you have sex and then she regrets it, then you know, you're, you know, equally in the shit"

"It tends to always be the guy who gets in trouble, even though you might fully be thinking that they want it at the time"

At the end of the study John defined consent as "when the other person knows what you're going to do and wants to partake and then tells you that they do". He notes how it can be determined from non-verbal signals but should be "more verbal" to be clear.

Zixin – Interview 1, 1 diary (casual sex), Interview 2

Zixin is a 23 year old Chinese international student. During his interviews the language barrier was sometimes an issue and there were moments of confusion or miscommunication between Zixin and myself as the interviewer.

He is heterosexual and whilst he has had girlfriends before, is currently single. He consumes video pornography 2/3 times per week, and when he had a girlfriend in China, they would have sex a couple of times per week. Currently, he has infrequent casual sex, and had one, one night stand over the study period. When he was having frequent sex in China, he only had sex in a hotel. He explained that this was the cultural norm. As his parents did not know he had a girlfriend, they would go to a cheap hotel a couple of times per week to have sex. He would also watch pornography with his girlfriend, a variety of different types, for arousal and inspiration.

When he is watching porn alone, he prefers to watch porn which shows a woman on her own, masturbating, and he enjoys the audio more than the visual. He will find video pornography on mainstream porn sites such as Pornhub. Zixin liked the sample videos, but as they showed couples, they were not the sort of videos he would usually enjoy. He did consume other porn, the masturbation porn he usually likes, over the study period.

He will Google sex questions, or if he has a serious health concern, he will feel comfortable going to the doctor. He learnt about consent, about sex generally, from his friends and peers. Sometimes they tell "sex jokes" as a way of talking about sex. He did not receive any sex education from his parents, and school only talked about sex in terms of reproductive biology.

At the end of the study, he still understood consent as the absence of refusal, "So if I ask, she doesn't refuse me, it means consent". He thinks that he should ask for consent, but if they are silent in return, that is taken to mean "yes". He was the only

participant not to engage in reflection on consent in the second interview, he did not notice the communication or talking in the videos, and his idea of consent was not altered through the study process. Potentially this was due to the differing language and cultural norms.

Ellis - Interview 1, 1 diary (casual sex), Interview 2

Ellis is 20 years old, white British and describes their sexual identity as sapphic, "so only into female presenting people". They grew up in Switzerland and came to the UK for university. They also identify as gender fluid. They use any pronouns and have some days when they feel more masculine and others when they feel more feminine. They said that as the paper "focuses on men" they are happy to be included in this group, moreover, they self-selected to take part in the study as advertised for "men who have sex with women". They feel like they fit into this group because they "only have sex with women, or sex in general... on masculine days... when I'm having sex, for the most part, it is in a very masculine sense and way, of me being dom, her being sub". They understand their sexual practice as following masculine gender norms.

They tend to watch porn daily and engage in casual sex roughly biweekly, which is a mixture of friends with benefits arrangements and hook ups. They have also had longer term girlfriends in the past. Ellis mostly finds porn online on Pornhub. They use porn as a tool to aid masturbation, which they also use as a "tool", sometimes to "unstress" or help them get to sleep. They also think porn is

useful to investigate sexual desires and experiment without involving other people. Porn has helped them to understand the type of "girls" they are attracted to. However, they say they have mostly learnt about sex through experiences with other people. Ellis explains that when they feel more masculine, they consume more mainstream porn on Pornhub, and on feminine days they like to look on websites with more "LGBT diversity" and more "plotlines" or a clear story, following stereotypical gender preferences for porn. They enjoy porn with communication, which explains why the sex is happening, and likes when condom use is shown for realism. They watched the sample videos weekly during the study and enjoyed them as erotic material. However, they felt like they were unrealistic because they did not have a plot or story to explain why sex was happening.

They often reiterate that they feel like they do consent too well, that they are too thorough and verbal, and that their sexual partners "getting frustrated that I'm doing, asking too many questions". They are also hyper-vigilant about not accidentally putting any pressure on partners to have sex before they are ready. They are also very aware of their partner's experience level, discussed having sex with "virgins", and that they would be more careful with "virgins" as they might have more worries about sex.

They explain that they were less confident with consent when they were younger. They describe how when they were with their first girlfriend at 16, they were confused as to why she never wanted to do anything sexual, although she has now "come out as asexual", as they were not confident to communicate about sex. They feel confident nowadays talking to their friends about sex and has given sex information and advice to less experienced friends. They have also experienced sexual assault, which influences

their values regarding consent: "I've got a number of friends who've been sexually assaulted, including myself. And a lot of the time they didn't say no, but they never said yes".

Ellis' parents were open about sex, and they also learnt about sex from their peers in school, "when you were 11, 12, 13, you had to ask the girl if you wanted to kiss them". They also learnt about consent from films and television. With age they learnt more about social cues regarding consent. Their sex education in school discussed consent but only in terms of the law and rape. They also described their school as homophobic, both in the classroom and the wider peer culture. They describe that when they moved to the UK for university, they were able to talk about sex and LGBTQ+ topics easily. When they were at school there was a consent miscommunication issue which also influenced their feelings about consent.

At the end of the study, they understood consent as a specific agreement which can be taken back at any time and want to distance themselves from men, they know at the university who practise consent badly.

Chris - Interview 1, no diaries (no sex), Interview 2

Chris is 25 years old, white British and described himself as "mostly straight" but questioning whether he might be pansexual. He notes that he would rather not give himself a label whilst he is still "working it out". Chris was in a long-term relationship with a woman for eight years, which ended a few months prior to his involvement in the study. In addition, his only relationship or sexual

experience has been with this woman. He has been thinking about starting to date again in future and is nervous about navigating dating or casual sex for the first time.

He does not frequently watch video pornography, doing this a couple of times per month, but he does look at pornographic images a few times per week. He says that video porn feels "fake" and so is not arousing when compared to having sex with a "real person". He enjoys videos when it looks more realistic, and the performers look like they are "having fun with each other".

Therefore, he prefers images of a person alone, as he can imagine a relatable narrative around the image. He notes that often mainstream porn feels too unrealistic to enjoy. The scenarios feel "weird", and the acts shown do not seem arousing in real life. He points to feminist porn companies as his favourites as they show more real pleasure. He will find short videos by these companies on other free porn sites but notes that there are "ethical" questions around this.

Chris explains that if he has questions about sex, he will likely Google them and look at different sources online. However, he thinks that sexual practice is "more just something you have to figure out in real life". He first learnt about consent in sex education in school. He was shown the "cup of tea" video and feels like it is still useful and memorable today. However, he could not remember what was included in the rest of the lessons. His present friendships, a mixture of university and online friends, support prioritising consent through fun and jokes, and they will discuss consent lightly as a "meme". He also thinks that his understanding of consent improved with age, and when he was more "immature" he found it harder to notice non-verbal cues.

During the study period, he watched at least one video per week as per instructions. He watched some videos more often if he liked them, but no more than a couple of times per week and enjoyed them as erotic material. He also looked pornographic images over the study period. His favourite film was the Bellesa films video as the sex presented in the film was his "ideal sexual experience".

Chris defines consent at the end of the study as agreeing to what is happening currently and what will happen next. He also notes how consent may be verbal or non-verbal and includes understanding boundaries and safety as well as ensuring agreement.

Henry - Interview 1, no diaries (no sex), Interview 2

Henry is 19 and describes himself as white and bisexual. He does not currently have a partner and explains that he is not "good" at casual sex and would prefer to have sex in a relationship in future. Therefore, in the interviews he discussed past relationships, girlfriends and casual sexual partners.

He describes his porn consumption, of a couple of times per month as infrequent, and says that he does not consume much porn because he feels like most of it is "kind of gross". He dislikes the dominant presentation of men in mainstream porn and thinks that a lot of porn is "weird" or makes him feel uncomfortable. If he does consume porn, it will usually be a solo video, and it is often when he is drunk or bored rather than part of a regular routine. With solo images or videos, he likes to imagine a scenario involving the attractive person, and he thinks it is unpleasant to watch videos with multiple people because the viewer needs to watch

someone else have sex with a person, they find attractive and might like to have sex with. He uses hyperbolic language to describe his distaste for pornography. He will find porn from mainstream sources; Pornhub or Twitter, and "pick something that doesn't look too grotesque and get it over with", rather than searching for porn from alternate sources.

During the study, he expressed distaste for the videos which were "rough or weird or had bum stuff in it", preferring the "more calm and normal ones". His normative values regarding sex and porn were obvious here, as he linked "weird" to "rough" and "bum stuff" and "normal" to "calm". He also made an effort to hide the sample videos on his computer to avoid the embarrassment of somebody finding them. Although he reiterated that he did not like the sample videos and does not like porn generally, he did watch the sample videos multiple times, and multiple times per week, more often than he was asked to for the study. He also said that he would not search for porn with consent in future because he never searches for any specific type of porn.

If Henry had questions about sex he would turn to Google because he "wouldn't feel like I could go anywhere else". He notes that when he was in school, he would have been able to talk to a teacher even if it was "embarrassing", but now he does not have anywhere to go. He had sex education during the end of primary school and thinks that consent "obviously, definitely" should have been taught, but he cannot remember this. He does remember seeing things online and in the news about sexual assault and "horrible, horrible things that happen", which have led to the importance of consent becoming "ingrained" in him. He also explains that he feels like he has got more confident about consent with age.

At the end of the study, Henry defined consent as making sure that "someone is okay, that somebody else wants to engage in an activity with you" and can apply to more than just sex.

Chima - Interview 1

Chima is 19 years old, Black British and Heterosexual. He is currently in a relationship and has sex with his girlfriend every couple of days. He says that he also watches porn every couple of days and enjoys visual pornography whereby he can imagine himself in the scene and thus relate to the situation shown. He sometimes finds pornography on Twitter and other times uses porn sites such as Pornhub or XVideos.

When asked if he had anything to add at the end of the interview, Chima expressed that he assumed I would ask about the negative impact of porn on sexual experiences. He explains that in his sex education classes in school, his teacher told him "the more you watch porn, you'll find it harder to ejaculate when you have sex". He expressed that he feels "concerned" because he often does not ejaculate or feels like it takes too long, when he has sex, and thinks about this "frequently". Thus, the misinformation he was given in school from someone who should have been a trusted source, has impacted how he perceives porn and sex currently. The teacher's fear tactics did not stop him consuming porn but did lead him to worry and feel stressed about sex and his sexual performance.

Chima would go to his GP if he was worried about his sexual health (STIs). If he had questions about how to make the "experience" better for his partner, how to pleasure a woman, he would go to his female friends because they would give the women's perspective. However, he feels like there is "not really anywhere" to go if he had sexual worries or questions. As he wanted to talk to me about his sexual anxieties in the interview, this reiterates the fact that he feels like he has nobody to talk to about these.

Dylan - Interview 1

Dylan is 20 years old, mixed race (Indian and white) and bisexual. He is also autistic and explained that his autism impacts his consent practice because he is "not the best at like reading signs like yeah intuitively". He has been with his non-binary partner for just over a year and they have sex on average every day. He explains that in some periods it is less frequent and in others it will be a few times each day.

He has a history of poor consent practice in an unhealthy relationship when he was young. He explains that his first sexual experiences were when he was "12 or 13" with a boy from school, who was "very sexually forward". He explains that a "lot of the time it was my partner kind of pestering me and then eventually I just let them". He does not call this sexual harassment, coercion or abuse, but was clearly uncomfortable and reluctant to discuss it, so we did not explore this in detail in the interview. Dylan also explains that he is a "recovering alcoholic" which hindered his ability to give enthusiastic consent. He explains, "I think a lot of the

time if someone wanted to have sex with me, I think that my self-esteem was so low, and my brain was so fried that going with it was just kind of the easiest option". In many of these experiences, he would not give enthusiastic consent, but also felt like he could not refuse sex. Dylan feels that as he has got older, matured and experienced healthy relationships where he has been reassured that his needs are important, he has found it easier to "voice my needs and my wants".

Dylan consumes pornography a few times per week, a mixture of videos and pictures. However, he does not enjoy online porn and instead only consumes homemade content created by himself and his partner. He knows people who have created porn and feels like their experiences have been poor, which makes him not want to consume it. He also feels like solo porn, such as on OnlyFans, is very different to porn videos involving multiple people, and that the people who create this have fewer negative experiences, so it is less problematic to consume. He also dislikes the idea of watching porn with multiple people because it would involve watching someone, he finds attractive and likes the idea of having sex with, have sex with another person.

He enjoys sexual experimentation and will have conversations with his partner about things they want to try, however, he would not copy from porn as he feels that this would cheapen the experience, and mainstream porn is often presenting a fantasy which would not be enjoyable in real life.

If Dylan had questions about sex he would Google it, or if he had symptoms of an STI, see a doctor. However, he was unsure of where he could go, repeating "geez, I don't know".

Owen - Interview 1

Owen is 20 years old, white and heterosexual. He is currently single and engages in casual sex every couple of months, meeting women in bars and clubs. These tend to be short encounters, but he is likely to have sex with each person a few times as opposed to one-night stands.

He is aware of "some guys" poor consent methods, such as pushing a woman's head when they want oral sex and wants to distance himself from those practices. He also feels like he is "quite kind of timid", and "not very forceful" when it comes to sex and relationships and links this to a good awareness of consent "signals. Owen also feels like he is "still learning a lot about sex and girls" but feels like he will feel more confident with age and experience.

Owen usually watches porn a couple of times per week, visiting Pornhub for mainstream content. Whilst he enjoys consuming porn, he does not like the process of searching for videos on a website because he needs to look through a "load of crap" he does not want to view. He explains that it feels "dirty", looking at "tons of different naked people", whilst scrolling to find a video. He sometimes feels regret at watching porn, or shame, if he is feeling bad about himself generally. He feels like he needs to achieve a certain level of socialisation to "deserve" to watch porn; it is a reward which needs to be earned.

He might Google sex questions or look on YouTube, to find people sharing their personal experiences. However, he would not talk about sex with his friends. Owen and his friends might joke about girls they think are attractive but would never seriously discuss how they "felt" about sex and relationships, and he feels like it would have been "productive" if they could discuss these things. He also expressed worries about the impact of COVID on young people with regards to sex and relationships. As the pandemic "caused quite a lot of damage to people's kind of social confidence", this also impacts the ability to navigate sex.

Eric - Interview 1

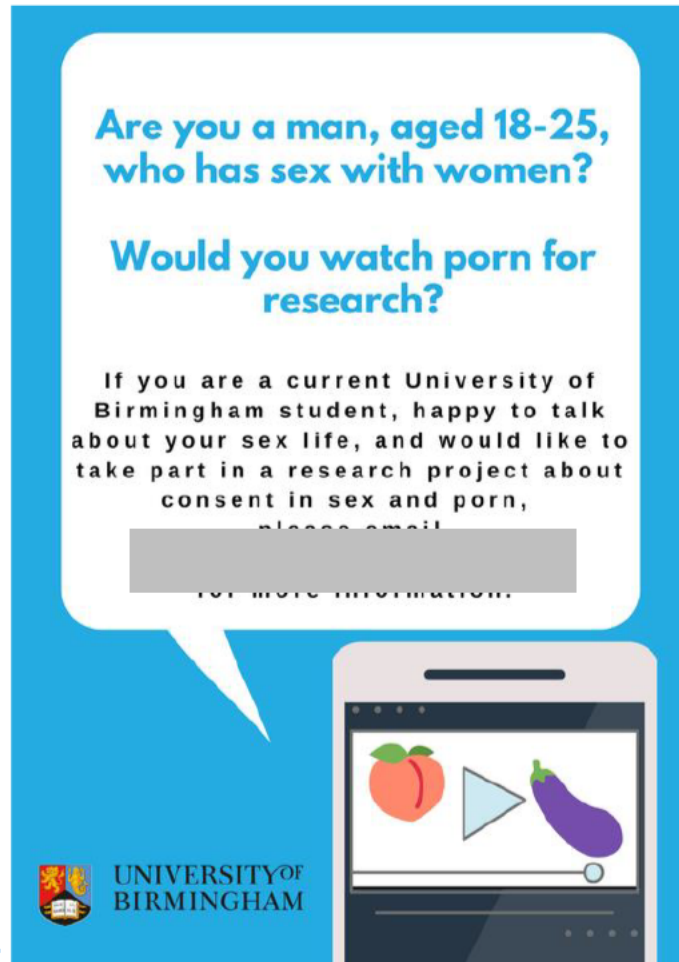
Eric is 20 years old and white British. He has previously identified as heterosexual but had recently been questioning his sexuality and thinks he could be biromantic. He explains that he has "never fully understood sexuality" but has explored his via watching gay porn. Eric's relationship ended a fortnight prior to taking part in the study. When he was with his ex-girlfriend, they would have sex a few times per week. His ex-girlfriend was his first sexual partner, and he has had one casual encounter since, so most of his sexual experience was with his past partner. Eric understands himself as having a "much lower sex drive", so he has not often initiated sex and so consent for him, is more about how he gives it, than how he asks for it. He feels like this is unusual "compared to most guys". He also notes that once he started to have sex, he felt a pressure to want and have sex more frequently.

Eric usually watches porn a couple of times per week, usually finding it on Pornhub and sometimes Reddit. He started consuming porn young, at about 10/11 years old. He also worries that in the past his porn consumption has been "too much" or excessive". When watching porn, he has looked at specific categories to help him to understand his desires. For example, he has consumed BDSM porn, and this has helped him to understand that he enjoys bondage and domination, but does not like sadomasochism, he does not "see the appeal of like whipping people and stuff like that".

He also explains that he has felt "confused", because he does not orgasm or ejaculate frequently with a partner. Although he would be "happy just to just like fuck for 10 minutes and then kind of move on", he would feel "uncomfortable" about this because it did not feel "appropriate", and he worried it would hurt his partner's feelings. He is both anxious about his inability to orgasm, why this is, and anxious about this impact of this on his sexual partners. Eric thought that porn had "damaged my brain". He was "convinced that maybe it was because I was watching porn masturbating, kind of like ruining my body's response", so he stopped watching porn, but the issue persisted. Thus, misinformation and anxiety about porn and sex has greatly impacted his life.

Despite feeling high levels of anxiety about sex, relationships and porn, he does not feel like he could ever speak to his friends about this. He would not feel comfortable talking to his friends and feel like "lot of guys have inflated egos about how good they are", bragging about their sexual prowess, so would not give good advice about sexual worries. In the absence of other places to go to for advice, Eric would Google questions about sex.

3. RECRUITMENT MATERIALS



Poster:

Example direct messages:

Hi,

I am a PhD researcher at the University of Birmingham and I am working on a project about sex, consent and porn.

This project looks at the impact of porn which shows explicit consent, and I am looking for men who are students at the university to take part. Participants will need to be aged 18-25 and have sex with women. Taking part will involve 2 casual telephone interviews during which we will discuss sex and porn, watching some sample pornographic videos, and writing some diary entries, which will involve writing some notes about the thoughts and feelings which come up during sexual experiences.

The project has ethical approval from the University of Birmingham.

If you are interested, please email [REDACTED] for more information.

If you are not interested, or are not part of the group described above, I would really appreciate you sharing this with any friends who may want to take part.

Thank you very much,

Emily Harle

Hiya, now that it's the summer, I was wondering if you were interested in the above, or could pass it on to any friends who might be!

Thank you

Hi,

I am a PhD researcher at the University of Birmingham and I am working on a project about sex, consent and porn.

This project looks at the impact of porn which shows explicit consent, and I am looking for men who are students at the university to take part. Participants will need to be aged 18-25 and have sex with women. Taking part will involve 2 casual telephone interviews during which we will discuss sex and porn, watching some sample pornographic videos, and writing some diary entries, which will involve writing some notes about the thoughts and feelings which come up during sexual experiences.

The project has ethical approval from the University of Birmingham.

I was wondering if I could attend one of your practises for 2mins or so to discuss the research, and/or, if I would have your permission to message some of your group members about the research?

Thank you very much,

Emily Harle

4. PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Thank you for your interest in taking part in this research.

Please find detailed below, information about the research and research process.

If you would like to take part, please read this in full and then fill in the accompanying consent form.

If you have any further questions, please contact:

What are the aims of this research?

This research aims to explore the impact of video pornography with explicit consent. Previous research has explored the impact of pornography which showcases condom use, defining safe sex as physically safe sex, but consent has not been fully considered in this way. Inversely, research has been conducted to explore the impact of pornography which does not show consent, or which shows a disregard for consent.

What will happen during the data collection processes?

Data will be collected over a 6 week period in stages.

I will communicate you via your given email and telephone number only..

You will firstly be invited to a 45-minute telephone interview. During the interview, we will discuss sex and porn broadly.

In the second stage, you will be sent via email, a link to some examples of video pornography with explicit consent. You will be sent a list of the video descriptions first, and then will only receive the videos you are happy to watch. You will be asked to watch the videos at least once a week during the 6-week data collection period.

You will also be sent a diary entry document. I will ask you to fill in an entry after each time you engage in any sort of sexual or romantic activity with another person, up to 4 times per week. The diary entry sheets will contain some short questions/prompts about the experience. You can of course have sex as often as you like, but you do not need to write more than 4 entries per week. If you do not engage in any activities in any given week, you will not need to fill in any entries that week. I will ask you to email this document back to me after 6 weeks.

In the final stage, you will be invited to a second and follow-up interview. Again, this will be 45 minutes via telephone. We will discuss sex and porn again, as well as your diary entries.

You will be sent a consent form to fill in before each of the stages.

You can contact me about any questions or concerns at any time during the data collection process.

What if I feel uncomfortable at any point during the data collection process?

If at any point during one of the interviews, you feel uncomfortable, please just let me know and I will be happy to skip any questions, to pause the interview for a while, to pause and reconvene later, or to fully end the interview early. If there is anything I can do to make the process more comfortable for you, please let me know and I will be happy to make alternations/accommodations.

If any prompts in the diary entry sheets make you feel uncomfortable, please just write that you do not wish to answer. No answer or explanation beyond this will be needed.

How will my privacy be protected?

Once you have agreed to take part in the research, you will be assigned an ID code. This ID code will be used to identify your responses for the purposes of data analysis and reporting. All interactions with me will be confidential. Raw data will only be

available to myself and my supervisors. Your data will be kept in a secure, password protected store during the data collection and analysis processes.

What will happen to my data?

Your data, alongside the data from other participants, will be analysed by myself. Data will be identified using ID codes during the analysis process. It will then be written up to provide the backbone of my PhD thesis. Data will be anonymised in all reporting using pseudonyms. Following the completion of the thesis, data will be stored in a university secure online store for 10 years, in accordance with the University of Birmingham's data storage policy.

How would I withdraw from the study?

During the data collection process, you can withdraw at any time. Please email [REDACTED] to withdraw. Please explain if you would like to end your participation early but allow the data collected thus far to be used, or if you would like to withdraw all your data from the study.

Following the completion of the data collection process, you can email to withdraw your data at any time within 4 weeks of completion. At the end of your second interview, you will be given a set deadline, after which, you will not be able to withdraw your data, because the analysis processes will be underway.

Who should I contact for more information or if I have any further questions?

If you have any further questions please contact the PhD researcher, Emily Harle: [REDACTED]

Or the primary supervisor for this project, Dr Matthew Gibson: [REDACTED]

5. PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM: INTERVIEW 1

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research.

Please read the consent form below carefully and initial each statement, to indicate your agreement. Please then sign and date the document at the bottom of the page to give consent to take part. This form can be filled out electronically.

Please return the form to:

A grey rectangular box used to redact contact information.

- I confirm that I have read the participant information sheet and understand what this research would involve. I have been given the opportunity to ask any questions about the nature or content of this research.

- I confirm that I am aged 18-25 and am a current student at the University of Birmingham.

- I understand that I will be given a new consent form for each stage of the research and that my consent is required before each new stage can take place.

- I consent to being assigned an ID code to anonymise my data for the purposes of analysis and reporting.

- I understand that my participation is voluntary, and I can withdraw at any time during the data collection process, and I can withdraw my data prior to 4 weeks following the completion of the second interview.

- I consent to take part in the first stage of this research project. I consent to attend a 45-minute telephone interview during which pornography, sex and consent will be discussed.

- I understand that I may skip any questions or pause/end the interview at any time.

- I consent to the audio of my interview being recorded for the purposes of transcription and data analysis.

- I understand that in compliance with the University of Birmingham's data storage procedure, my data will be stored in a secure data storage system for 10 years.

I consent to take part in this research.

Signed:

Date:

6. PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM: CONSENT FOR THE RECEIPT OF PORNOGRAPHIC VIDEOS

Thank you for your continued participation in this research.

Please read the consent form below carefully and initial each statement, to indicate your agreement. Please then sign and date the document at the bottom of the page to give consent to take part. This form can be filled out electronically.

Please return the form to:

A grey rectangular box redacting contact information.

- I confirm that I have read the participant information sheet and understand what this research would involve. I have been given the opportunity to ask any questions about the nature or content of this research.

- I confirm that I am aged 18+ and a current student at the University of Birmingham.

- I agree to be sent a link to a file of pornographic videos via email.

- I consent to download these videos to a location best suited to me.

- I consent to view some of the agreed videos at least once per week during the 6-week data collection period.

Please read the descriptions for each video below. Please initial next to each video you consent to receive and watch.

Video Title	Content	Consent to receive?
BLACKED Sexy Purple Bitch gives guest the 5-star treatment	Oral sex on vulva Manual sex on penis	

	<p>Oral sex on penis</p> <p>Vaginal Intercourse</p> <p>Hair pulling</p> <p>Apparent female orgasm</p>	
<p>PASCALSSUBSLUTS - Skinny</p> <p>Nadja Noja Endures Rough</p> <p>Fucking</p>	<p>Oral sex on penis</p> <p>Vaginal intercourse</p> <p>Spanking</p> <p>Choking</p> <p>Hair pulling</p> <p>Masturbation of dildo</p> <p>Female masturbation during intercourse</p> <p>Nipple pulling</p>	

	Rough manual sex on vagina Squirting	
BJRAW Octavia Red is an oral goddess	Striptease Female masturbation Kissing Manual sex on penis Nipple sucking Oral sex on penis	
Bellesa Films - Nice to Meet You. Again	Kissing Nipple sucking Frottage (grinding) Oral sex on penis	

	<p>Oral sex on vulva</p> <p>Vaginal intercourse</p>	
<p>Big Boner Straight Up Lil Jades</p> <p>Ass2</p>	<p>Anal licking</p> <p>Medical toys (syringe of lubricant inserted into anus)</p> <p>Anal penetration</p> <p>Anal gaping</p> <p>Kissing</p>	
<p>Eliza Ibarra Reaches Multiple</p> <p>Orgasm on Contractor's Big Black</p> <p>Cock</p>	<p>Oral sex on penis</p> <p>Rough oral sex on penis</p> <p>Gagging on penis</p> <p>Female masturbation</p> <p>Vaginal intercourse</p>	

	Spanking Hair pulling Apparent female orgasm	
TUSHY Anal-hungry Armani loves to get in trouble with boss	Oral sex on penis Frottage (grinding) Spanking Manual stimulation of anus Anal intercourse Female masturbation during intercourse Female orgasm	
Busty Blonde Teen with Big Natural Tits Blake Blossom Fuck J-Mac's Big Dick	Striptease Oiled body	

	Manual sex on penis Oral sex on penis Manual sex using breasts Vaginal intercourse	
Babes Emily Willis Is Thrilled to See Her Hot New Neighbor Small Hands Move In & Asks Him to Fuck	Kissing Nipple sucking Hair pulling Finger sucking Oral sex on penis Choking Rough oral sex on penis Gagging on penis	

	Spanking	
	Manual sex on vagina	
	Anal licking	
	Oral sex on vulva	
	Vaginal intercourse	
	Female masturbation during intercourse	
	Multiple female orgasm	

I consent to take part in this research.

Signed:

Date:

7. PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM: THE DIARIES

Thank you for your continued participation in this research.

Please read the consent form below carefully and initial each statement, to indicate your agreement. Please then sign and date the document at the bottom of the page to give consent to take part. This form can be filled out electronically.

Please return the form to:

A grey rectangular box used to redact contact information.

- I confirm that I have read the participant information sheet and understand what this research would involve. I have been given the opportunity to ask any questions about the nature or content of this research.

- I confirm that I am aged 18+ and a current student at the University of Birmingham.

- I understand that I will be given a new consent form for each stage of the research and that my consent is required before each new stage can take place.

- I consent to being assigned an ID code to anonymise my data for the purposes of analysis and reporting.

- I understand that my participation is voluntary, and I can withdraw at any time during the data collection process, and I can withdraw my data prior to 4 weeks following the completion of the second interview.

- I consent to complete a diary entry sheet following each experience of sexual activity, up to a maximum of 4 entries per week, for the 6 week data collection period.

- I agree that at the end of the 6 week period, I will return my diary entry document to EXH757@student.bham.ac.uk.
- I understand that in compliance with the University of Birmingham's data storage procedure, my data will be stored in a secure data storage system for 10 years.

I consent to take part in this research.

Signed:

Date:

8. PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM: INTERVIEW 2

Thank you for your continued participation in this research.

Please read the consent form below carefully and initial each statement, to indicate your agreement. Please then sign and date the document at the bottom of the page to give consent to take part. This form can be filled out electronically.

Please return the form to:

A grey rectangular box used to redact contact information.

- I confirm that I have read the participant information sheet and understand what this research would involve. I have been given the opportunity to ask any questions about the nature or content of this research.

- I confirm that I am aged 18+ and a current student at the University of Birmingham.

- I understand that I will be given a new consent form for each stage of the research and that my consent is required before each new stage can take place.

- I consent to being assigned an ID code to anonymise my data for the purposes of analysis and reporting.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary, and I can withdraw at any time during the data collection process, and I can withdraw my data prior to 1 month following the completion of the second interview.
- I consent to take part in the final stage of this research project. I consent to attend a 45-minute zoom interview during which pornography, sex and consent will be discussed.
- I understand that I do not need to put my camera on for the interview and that I may skip any questions or pause/end the interview at any time.
- I consent to the audio of my interview being recorded for the purposes of transcription and data analysis.

- I understand that in compliance with the University of Birmingham's data storage procedure, my data will be stored in a secure data storage system for 10 years.

I consent to take part in this research.

Signature:

Date:

9. CLOSING LETTER AND LINKS TO SUPPORT

Thank you!

Thank you for participating in this research project. Your participation has been invaluable and is greatly appreciated. If you have any final questions about this study, please email [REDACTED].

If for any reason you would like to withdraw your data from this study, your deadline for withdrawal is _____. Please email your request to [REDACTED].

Please find detailed below some supportive resources about sexual consent, sexual health, and wellbeing.

Understanding Consent:

Family Planning Association: 'Confused by Consent?'

Sexwise: 'What is Consent?'

Fumble: 'Is Sexual Consent More Complicated Than A 'Yes' or 'No'?''

Fumble: 'Alcohol and Consent'

Fumble: 'Talking To Friends About Sexual Consent'

Sexual Abuse Support:

NHS: Rape and sexual assault referral centres

Brook: 'Abuse & Violence, Help and Support'

Revenge Porn Helpline

Sexual Wellbeing:

Fumble: Sex

Brook: Porn

Brook: Sexuality

Sexwise: Sexual Wellbeing

School of Sexuality Education: University Programmes

MSI Reproductive Choices

Terrance Higgins Trust

Family Planning Association UK

NHS: Sexual health information and support

10. INTERVIEW GUIDES AND DIARY TEMPLATES

Semi-structured interview example prompts

Below are some examples of the prompts which may be used in the two semi-structured interviews.

This are subject to change as both interviews will be participant-led, and the second interview will be influenced by that participants' responses to the materials in the diary entries.

Interview 1

At the start of the first interview, I will ask for some demographic information about the participant.

They will not need to answer any questions, they do not wish to.

- *Age*
- *Ethnicity*
- *Sexuality*
- *How often do you usually watch porn?*
- *How frequently do you usually have sex? Is this casual sex or within a relationship?*

Prompts: (To be used as and when they are relevant to the direction of the discussion, as led by the participant. Not all examples below need to be used.)

- How would you usually initiate or suggest sex? Is this ever difficult?
- How can you tell if someone wants to have sex with you?
- If someone initiates sex with you, how do you show that you're into it? How might you show or tell them that you don't want to?
- Can you think of an example where you were having sex with someone and they were very enthusiastic or into it, how could you tell they really wanted it?

- Can you think of a time when you were having sex and they didn't really seem very into it? How could you tell? What happened next?
- Can you think of a time when you weren't sure if someone wanted sex or not? What was unclear?
- Do you like watching porn?
- Do you ever incorporate things you see in porn into your sex life?
- Where do you usually find porn? Any particular websites?
- If you had questions about sex, where might you go for answers?

Interview 2

Prompts: (To be used as and when they are relevant to the direction of the discussion, as led by the participant. Not all examples below need to be used.)

General Prompts for all participants:

- How can you tell if someone wants to have sex with you?
 - Did you like watching the sample materials?
 - How often did you end up watching the sample materials?
 - Did you watch one video more often?
 - What did you do whilst watching the sample videos?
 - Did you enjoy watching other porn over the last few weeks?
 - Did you notice the instances of consent in the videos, was this obvious or subtle?
 - Did you think about how consent was used in the videos after watching them?
-
- How did you usually initiate or suggest sex over the past 6 weeks?
 - If someone initiated sex with you in the past 6 weeks, how did you show that you're into it? Or how did you let them know that you weren't into it?
 - Can you think of an example where you were having sex with someone in the past 6 weeks and they were very enthusiastic or into it, how could you tell they really wanted it?

- Was there a time in the past 6 weeks when you were having sex and they didn't really seem very into it? How could you tell?
What happened next?
 - Can you think of a time when you weren't sure if someone wanted sex or not in the past 6 weeks? What was unclear?
 - Have you copied anything you have seen in porn over the past 6 weeks? Was this from the sample materials or other porn?
 - Did you ever think about the sample materials at all after watching them?
 - Did the sample videos reflect the sort of sex you have had over the past few weeks?
 - Were the sample videos very different to how you like to have sex?
 - Would you ever google porn with explicit consent? If it happened to appear in a different search, would you watch it?
 - Did your partner engage at all with the sample videos?
 - Did you have any interesting discussions about the study with your partner?
-
- Where did you first learn about consent, have you learned about it from other places since?
 - How do you define consent? Have you ever defined it differently?
 - Do you feel like your understanding of what consent is has ever changed?
 - Has consent played a different role with previous partners?

Questions will also be guided by each specific individual's responses in their diary entry sheets. Some examples of questions which may be asked in relation to these responses are listed below:

- You mentioned that X video influenced you most often, why do you think this was?
- Would you seek out any of the videos you said influenced you outside of this study?
- You said that you found X scenario difficult to navigated. Why was this? Could any of the videos give you any tips to navigate this scenario more easily?
- You said that none of the videos influenced you. Why do you think this might be the case?
- You said that X video was unhelpful, how might this video be made more useful?

11. DIARY ENTRY DOCUMENT

Thank you very much for your participation in this research.

Please fill in a diary entry sheet after each time you engage in any sexual activity with another person, between 0-4 times per week.

You can have sex more than 4 times per week but will not need to fill in more than 4 diary entry sheets per week. If you do not engage in any sexual activities in any given week, you do not need to fill in any sheets for that week. Please fill these in during the 6-week data collection period.

The questions are really just prompts so don't worry if you can't answer every question every time, and if you have any other comments you would like to share, please note these down.

Week _/6

Sheet 1: DATE

What sexual activity/ies did you take part in?

How could you tell the other person wanted to do this? How could you tell that they were enjoying it?

How did you show or tell the other person that you wanted to do this and that you were enjoying it?

Were you ever not sure what the other person wanted or if they were enjoying it? What were you unsure about? Why was this unclear?

Did any of the sample videos influence this experience?

If yes, which video/s and how did it influence you?

Sheet 2: DATE

What sexual activity/ies did you take part in?

How could you tell the other person wanted to do this? How could you tell that they were enjoying it?

How did you show or tell the other person that you wanted to do this and that you were enjoying it?

Were you ever not sure what the other person wanted or if they were enjoying it? What were you unsure about? Why was this unclear?

Did any of the sample videos influence this experience?

If yes, which video/s and how did it influence you?

Sheet 3: DATE

What sexual activity/ies did you take part in?

How could you tell the other person wanted to do this? How could you tell that they were enjoying it?

How did you show or tell the other person that you wanted to do this and that you were enjoying it?

Were you ever not sure what the other person wanted or if they were enjoying it? What were you unsure about? Why was this unclear?

Did any of the sample videos influence this experience?

If yes, which video/s and how did it influence you?

Sheet 4: DATE

What sexual activity/ies did you take part in?

How could you tell the other person wanted to do this? How could you tell that they were enjoying it?

How did you show or tell the other person that you wanted to do this and that you were enjoying it?

Were you ever not sure what the other person wanted or if they were enjoying it? What were you unsure about? Why was this unclear?

Did any of the sample videos influence this experience?

If yes, which video/s and how did it influence you?

12. THE EXPLICIT SEXUAL CONSENT IN PORN CHECKLIST

Consent is often considered implicit in a pornographic film, and the viewer often assumes that consent has been agreed prior to filming. Therefore, for consent to be explicit in the context of a pornographic film, it must contain a verbal element.

Consent is a continuous process so an exchange of consent must be present between each new sexual act shown in the film.

One of the following must be present:

- Initiator asks for consent verbally and directly. E.g.: 'Can I do X to you?', 'Shall I get a condom?', 'Do you wanna X?'.
- Initiator makes a request or suggestion for their partner to agree to. E.g.: 'Get on the bed', 'It would be really hot if you did X', 'I'd like it if you did X'.

AND

One of the following must be present:

- Receiver gives consent verbally and directly. E.g.: 'yes', 'uhhuh', 'I'd like that'.
- Receiver gives consent non-verbally and directly. E.g.: nods, takes clothes off, begins the suggested activity.

AND

There are no verbal pressures or coercive comments such as threats or repeated asking.

Consent is given enthusiastically, willingly or with a positive attitude.

All involved appear sober, understanding and adult in the film.

13.FINAL SAMPLE MATERIALS CONTENT TABLE

The following final twelve videos were selected to be used in the study.

Vide o Cod e	Video Title	Website	Date access ed	Content	How consent was shown
Vide o1	BLACK ED Sexy Purple Bitch gives guest	XVideos.c om	02/08/2 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oral sex on vulva • Manual sex on penis • Oral sex on penis • Vaginal Intercourse • Hair pulling • Apparent female orgasm 	Throughout the video, one party verbally describes what they want and the other person consents either non-verbally (by starting the suggested activity), or verbally (by saying “yes”).

	the 5-star treatment			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Features a black man and white woman, may contain connotations of racial fetishization (BBC porn category) 	
Videos 2	PASCALSSUBSLUTS - Skinny Nads Noj Endures Rough	XVideos.com	02/08/22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Oral sex on penis Vaginal intercourse Spanking Choking Hair pulling Masturbation of dildo Female masturbation during intercourse Nipple pulling Rough manual sex on vagina 	Very clear verbal consent is given at the start of the video. The woman, who acts as the submissive party in this rough sex video, is asked explicitly which sex acts she enjoys and wants to take part in.

	Fuckin g			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Squirting • Older man and younger women • Discussions between the couple and cameraman during filming – suggestions of voyeurism 	
Vide o3	BJRA W Octavi a Red is an oral goddess	XVideos.com	02/08/2 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Striptease • Female masturbation • Kissing • Manual sex on penis • Nipple sucking • Oral sex on penis 	The man in the video asks the woman to complete various sex acts. She then consents verbally, by saying “yes”, or non-verbally, by beginning the suggested act.

Vide o4	Bellesa Films - Nice to Meet You. Again	Pornhub.c om	16/08/2 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussions of a drunken encounter the night before • Kissing • Nipple sucking • Frottage (grinding) • Oral sex on penis • Oral sex on vulva • Vaginal intercourse 	The video opens with a conversation during which the pair verbally agree to have sex. Then, during the video, they show non-verbal cues, such as smiling, nodding, or actively beginning/ participating in each sex act.
Vide o5	Big Boner Straigh t Up Lil Jades Ass2	Xnxx.com	24/08/2 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anal licking • Medical toys (syringe of lubricant inserted into anus) • Anal penetration • Anal gaping • Kissing 	The woman in the video asks for anal sex and the male actor agrees by actively starting the act. Later in the video, he then asks her to take part in other acts and she agrees.

Vide o6	Eliza Ibarra Reaches Multiple Orgasms on Contractor's Big Black Cock	Pornhub.com	23/08/22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oral sex on penis • Rough oral sex on penis • Gagging on penis • Female masturbation • Vaginal intercourse • Spanking • Hair pulling • Apparent female orgasm • Features a black man and white woman, may contain connotations of racial fetishization (BBC porn category) 	The female actor verbally suggests sex at the start of the video, and the man agrees before they start any sexual activity. Throughout the video, they verbally check in with each other and suggest different acts or styles.
Vide o7	TUSH Y Anal-	xvideos.com	14/09/22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oral sex on penis • Frottage (grinding) 	At the start of the video, the man suggests sex and the woman agrees. Later, she asks for anal

	hungry Armani loves to get in trouble with boss			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spanking • Manual stimulation of anus • Anal intercourse • Female masturbation during intercourse • Female orgasm 	sex specifically, and he shows non-verbal consent by beginning the suggested activity.
Vide o8	Busty Blonde Teen with Big Natural Tits	Xvideos.c om	14/09/2 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Striptease • Oiled body • Manual sex on penis • Oral sex on penis • Manual sex using breasts • Vaginal intercourse 	<p>The video title says teen but the women in the video states that she is 20 years old at the start.</p> <p>They have a conversation before any sexual activity takes place, where she describes which acts she enjoys and would like to take part in.</p> <p>The man in the video then asks her to start each</p>

	Blake Blossom m Fuck J- Mac's Big Dick				sexual act and she non-verbally consents by starting the suggested activity.
Vide o9	Babes Emily Willis Is Thrilled to See Her Hot New	Pornhub.com	03/10/2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kissing • Nipple sucking • Hair pulling • Finger sucking • Oral sex on penis • Choking • Rough oral sex on penis • Gagging on penis • Spanking 	Before each sex act, one party verbally asks or suggests the act, and the other either verbally agrees (for example, the woman says “yes please” frequently), or non-verbally, by starting the suggested act.

	Neighb or Small Hands Move In & Asks Him to Fuck			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manual sex on vagina • Anal licking • Oral sex on vulva • Vaginal intercourse • Female masturbation during intercourse • Multiple female orgasm 	
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